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RATHCROGHAN — A ROYAL SITE IN CONNACHT

JOHN WADDELL

Listen ye warriors about Cruachain with its burial mound for every noble couple (from the *Dindshenchas*).

A complex of ancient monuments in several townlands just north-west of the village of Tulsk in Co. Roscommon has, for several centuries at least, been traditionally equated with the celebrated Cruachain of early Irish epic literature. The only extensive account of these archaeological remains is that of H. T. Knox (1911, 1914, 1918) an account which even for its time is often less than illuminating.

The modern name Rathcroghan *(Ráith Chruachan* in Irish) embodies the genitive case of the old name Cruachu which T. F. O'Rahilly (1946, 26) has suggested may be a re-formation of a still older form Cruachain, possibly a plural tribal name. In early Irish literature, Cruachain is the seat of Ailill mac Máta, king of Connacht by reason of his marriage to Medb (or Maeve). In one sense the name Cruachain may refer to the royal seat, to the royal rath or fort of Cruachain, or even to a royal cemetery where many kings are said to have been buried. In a wider sense, it can refer to the limestone plain called Mag nAí or Machaire Chonnacht of the Roscommon — Elphin — Strokestown — Castlerea area (Hogan 1910, 311).

THE PSEUDO-HISTORICAL RATHCROGHAN

In the shadowy world of mythology and pseudo-history, it is perhaps not surprising to find that early references to Rathcroghan tell us little or nothing about the area and its monuments. They do, however, repeatedly indicate its importance both as a royal seat and as a sacred site. It is but one of several major royal sites in ancient Ireland such as Tara, Co. Meath, and Emain Macha, near Armagh, which are frequently mentioned in early literature. The literary references to Rathcroghan are quite varied. In some early Heroic and other tales 'Cruachain' figures as a royal settlement. In *Táin Bó Cuailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley') for example, the famous pillow talk between Ailill and Medb at the beginning of that epic tale takes place 'when their royal bed had been prepared for them in Ráth Cruachain in Connacht' (C. O'Rahilly 1967, 137). In the eighth century *Táin Bó Fraích* there is a fanciful description of the house of Ailill and Medb in the rath or fort of Cruachain:

'This was the arrangement of the house: seven partitions in it, seven beds from the fire to the wall in the house all around. There was a fronting of bronze on each bed, carved red yew all covered with fair varied ornament. Three rods of bronze at the step of each bed. Seven rods of copper from the centre of the floor to the ridge-pole of the house. The house was built of pine. A roof of slates was on it outside. There were sixteen windows in it, and a shutter of copper for each of them . . .' (Byrne and Dillon 1937, 3).

A similar account, with slightly fewer copper or bronze fitments, occurs in *Fled Bricrenn* ('Bricriu's Feast') and 'such was the spaciousness of the house that it had room for the hosts of valiant heroes of the whole province in the retinue of Conchobar' (Cross and Slover 1935, 267). The deliberate fantasy of descriptions such as these must have delighted the story-teller's audience in the Ireland of early Historic or Medieval times but they provide little information on the Rathcroghan of old. A chieftain's house in early Ireland may well have had its roof supported by carved and decorated timbers but such a detail may also be a story-teller's embellishment. For instance, 'Bricriu's Feast' contains an allusion to a

'compartment on the lintel of the fort' of Cruachain which, as MacEoin (1978) has pointed out, is a reference to a gate-way with an overhead compartment, there being no implication, however, that there was ever such a gate-tower at Rathcroghan at any time. As he emphasizes, the significance of this reference is that writers of the early Historic period, when stories such as 'Bricriu's Feast' were first committed to manuscript, 'visualised such gate-ways in composing their tales, thereby showing that these structures existed in their experience'. It may still be partly true that early Irish epic literature, as Jackson (1964) claimed, is a window on the prehistoric Iron Age, at least in so far as it depicts (and possibly exaggerates) the activities of a heroic warrior aristocracy preoccupied with ostentatious display and single-combat. However, as Mallory (1982) has shown for the sword described in the tales of the Ulster Cycle, much descriptive detail may reflect the contemporary world of the later redactor. In short, other than demonstrating the importance of Rathcroghan, references in early literature seem to shed little light on the royal settlement so often mentioned.

Rathcroghan is also described as a place of assembly or *óenach:* according to the ninth century *Triads of Ireland,* the three fairs of Ireland are the fair of Teltown, the fair of Croghan, the fair of Colmán Elo (Meyer 1906). Byrne (1973, 30) has written that this type of gathering 'was an important event in the calendar of a rural society, and was at once political assembly, market-fair (which is the sense of modern Irish *aonach)* and an occasion for general jollification . . . Games and horse-racing were an essential element of the *óenach.* There is little double that these were funerary in origin, and that the 'fair' was held on the site of an ancient tribal cemetery. The most famous of all was the *Óenach Tailten* or 'Fair of Teltown' in county Meath, which survived in attenuated form down to the last century. Presidency over the *Óenach Tailten* was a jealously guarded prerogative of the king of Tara. At the *óenach* the king could promulgate certain specific emergency measures and ordinances, for instance, in time of plague, defeat or foreign invasion.' In *Tochmarc Ferbe* ('The Courtship of Ferb') when one of the sons of Ailill and Medb came with his splendid company to Cruachain they ran their three *óenach* races on the green of Cruachain (Windisch 1891, 466). A reference to a race, won of course by Cú Chulainn, at *óenach na Cruachna* is to be found in the story of 'Bricriu's Feast' (Henderson 1899, 84) and O'Curry (1873, 343) records a poem which mentions the king of Connacht holding the games of the Lughnasa festival (August 1st) at Cruachain.

That Rathcroghan was in all probability an important burial ground and had a religious significance for later writers is clearly shown by various references in the literature to a cemetery where many kings are said to have been interred. In the twelfth century *Lebor na hUidre,* Cruachain along with Brugh na Bóinne in the Boyne Valley, Tailtiu (Teltown, Co. Meath) and several other places are named as the chief cemeteries of Erin before the Faith (quoted in Petrie 1845, 100). So too in the medieval *Eachtra Airt meic Cuind* ('The Adventures of Art son of Conn') where it is stated 'Tailltiu was one of the three chief burial-places of Ireland, namely the Fair of Tailltiu, and the Brugh, and the cemetery of Cruachan' (Meyer and Strachan 1907, 151). The notion that Rathcroghan was an important burial ground was familiar to the author of a poem on the area in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* (Gwynn 1913, 348) which begins with the stirring call *'Estid a churu im Cruachu fri dumu cach dag-núachair'*

(Listen ye warriors about Cruachain with its burial mound for every noble couple). In the *Lebor na hUidre* already mentioned, a tract called *Senchas na Relec* ('History of the Cemeteries') purports to list the royal personages buried there. These include Ailill and Medb, and a certain king named Dathi (or Nath 1). There is mention of fifty mounds at *Oenach na Cruachna* with 'fifty truly fine warlike men' under each mound. Further mention of fifty mounds at Teltown and at the Boyne confirms, if such were necessary, the unhistorical nature of the text. The story of Dathi's death and burial is briefly recounted here and in later manuscripts (O'Rahilly 1946, 213). He was said to have engaged in various warlike activities both in Ireland and abroad and to have been killed by lightning at the foot of the Alps (Sliab nElpa — but Alba or Britain is probably meant). He was, it is said, eventually buried at Rathcroghan. According to Byrne (1973, 78) these accounts belong 'to the *dindshenchas* or topographical genre, which is the repository of the least reliable type of Irish myth and legend, and this story is a characteristic farrago of the etymological ingenuities and misplaced learning of the medieval antiquaries'. Indeed the section on Rathcroghan in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* alluded to above is just such an example of etymological ingenuity: the name Cruachain is alleged to derive from one Crochen. This explanation is also given in *Cóir Anmann* ('Fitness of Names'): 'Medb of Cruachu and Cruachu itself, whence are they? Cruachu, that is Crochen the Red-skinned, the handmaid of Medb's mother Etáin, 'tis from her that Medb of Cruachu and Cruachu itself got their names' (Stokes 1891, 403).

Another tale of burial in the area of Rathcroghan is recounted in Tírechán's 'biography' of Saint Patrick where there is a story (quoted in Carney 1973, 130) of the baptism by Patrick and the subsequent death of the two daughters of Loíguire who were buried on the eastern slopes of Cruachain 'beside the well of Clebach, and they made a round ditch after the manner of a *fertae* for so did the Scotic folk and the heathens'. Carney has argued that this account of maidenly conversion and dramatic demise after baptism was adapted by Tírechán from another source and situated by him *in lateribus Crochan*. According to Eoin MacNeill we should consider much of what Tírechán wrote as 'the product of a childish imagination', a view strongly endorsed by Binchy (1962). Patrick is supposed to have built a clay-walled church near this well; if he ever did so, its location is unknown although several suggestions have been offered (Knox 1914, 1, 38; Sharkey 1927, 370; Connellan 1954).

If the various funerary references are an indication that Rathcroghan was a sacred site, its religious significance is also attested by the existence there of one of the entrances to the otherworld. This was the 'cave' of Cruachain: 'the Irish entrance to Hell', a centre of considerable mythological activity. In the *Metrical Dindshenchas* (Gwynn 1924, 201) the mighty Morrígan, an ancient goddess of battle, emerges from the cave of Cruachain, 'her fit abode'. This goddess also figures in the prose *Dindshenchas* where she carries off a bull and installs it and a cow in the cave (Stokes 1895, 65). Other animals aside from cattle are associated with this site — malevolent birds and pigs emerge from *úaim Chruachan*:

'. . . pigs of magic came out of the cave of Cruachain, and that is Ireland's gate of Hell. From out of it issued the monstrous triple-headed Ellén that wasted Erin till Amairgene, the father of Conall the Victorious, killed it in single combat before all the men of Ulster.
Out of it, also, came Red birds that withered up everything in Erin that their breaths would touch, till the Ulstermen slew them with their slings.
Out of it, moreover, came these swine. Round whatever thing they used to go, till the end of seven years neither corn nor grass nor leaf would grow through it. When they were being counted they would not stay, but they would go into another territory if any one tried to reckon them. They were

never numbered completely. "There are three there", says one man. "More, there are seven", says another. "There are nine there", says another. "Eleven swine!" "Thirteen swine!" In that way it was impossible to count them. They could not be killed, for if they were shot at, they used to disappear' (Stokes 1892, 449).

In *Acallamh na Senorach* ('The Colloquy of the Ancients') the daughter of Bodb, son of the god Dagda, comes from the cave to talk with Caílte who recognises her as one of the *Tuatha Dé Danann,* 'the people of the goddess Danu' (O'Grady 1892, 203). Another individual to come out of this populous cave is Olc Aí who even though he is depicted in the *Dindshenchas* as the guardian of the beautiful Findchoem (Stokes 1894, 484) is an otherworld figure whose name Olc has wolfish connotations (Ó Cathasaigh 1977, 33). Three female werewolves emerge from here every year and kill sheep; they are slain by Caílte and are described as 'the three daughters of Airitech, of the last of the Grievous Company from the Cave of Cruachu, and they prefer to rob in the shape of wolves rather than in human shape' (Jackson 1951, 176). Three heroes in the tale 'Bricriu's Feast' are tested by terrifying nocturnal cats:

'One night as their portion was assigned to them, three cats from the cave of Cruachan were let loose to attack them, that is, three beasts of magic. Conall and Loegaire made for the rafters, leaving their food with the beasts. In that wise they slept until the morrow. Cú Chulainn fled not from the beast which was attacking him. When it stretched its neck out for eating, Cú Chulainn gave a blow with a sword on the beast's head, but the blade glided off as it were from stone. Then the cat set itself down. Under the circumstances Cú Chulainn neither ate nor slept, but he kept his place. As soon as it was early morning the cats were gone. In such condition were the three heroes seen on the morrow' (Cross and Slover 1935, 268).

In the intriguing story variously known as *Echtra Nerai* ('The Adventures of Nera') or *Táin Bó Aingen* ('The Cattle Raid of Aingen') when Ailill and Medb and their household were celebrating the festival of Samhain (November 1st) at Cruachain, Nera goes outside and cuts down a captive who had been hung the day before and who complained of thirst. He gives him a drink and carries him back to his torture. On returning to the fort he finds that the otherworld people of the *síd* have burnt the court and left a heap of heads. Nera follows them into the cave of Cruachain and finds a home and a wife there. His wife eventually explains to him that the destruction he witnessed was a vision and that Cruachain will really be destroyed the following Samhain unless its inhabitants are warned. He leaves the otherworld to warn Ailill and Medb who destroy the *síd* but 'Nera was left with his people in the *síd,* and has not come out until now, nor will he come till Doom' (Meyer 1889; Cross and Slover 1935, 248). The terrors of the eve of Samhain when the hosts of the otherworld emerge find echoes in more recent times in the folklore of Hallowe'en when spirits walk abroad. Today a long narrow underground fissure in the limestone at Rathcroghan known as Oweynagat ('Cave of the cats') is generally believed to be the 'cave of Cruachain'. In 'The Adventures of Nera' the cave and the *síd* seem to be synonymous but *síd* is generally taken to mean a mound of the people of the otherworld (a 'fairy' hill or mound). Therefore other references to the *síd* of Cruachain may have the latter meaning. At the beginning of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge,* Feidelm the prophetess who foresees bloodshed among Medb's army comes from *síd Chruachna* (C. O'Rahilly 1967, 143) and in *Táin Bó Fraích* the wounded hero is carried therein by 'three times fifty women' to come out 'quite healed without defect or blemish' the next day (Byrne and Dillon 1937, 8). In *Táin Bó Regamna* ('The Cattle Raid of Regamna') Cú Chulainn confronts the Morrígan who brings a cow out of the *síd* and transforms herself into a black bird (Cross and Slover 1935, 213).

To more or less rational modern minds it may seem slightly incongruous to have an otherworld mound or a hazardous otherworld entrance close to a royal settlement. Their presence, however, and the various legends attached to them are an indication of the magico-religious importance of Rathcroghan, and the royal settlement itself is corroboration of the sacred character of the area. The kings of Cruachain themselves can be described as quasi-divine or sacred individuals.

Ailill was king of Connacht because of his marriage to Medb who had previously been the wife of Conchobar, king of Ulster, and two other Connacht kings. She was not a historical person but a goddess and her name is cognate with words in Irish and other languages signifying drunkeness (like the English word 'mead'), her name means 'the drunken one' or 'she who intoxicates'. The reign of each Irish pagan king was inaugurated by a mystic marriage with a goddess and the marriage may have taken the form of a ceremonial drinking session which induced a 'divine' intoxication of the new king. To gain possession of Medb of Cruachain was to gain possession of the kingship, a fact which explains the unusual number of her husbands (MacCana 1956, 76). She had a counterpart in Medb Lethderg of Tara who, it is said, 'mated with nine of the kings of Ireland'. Here, as O'Rahilly (1946a, 15) has indicated, we get a glimpse of the original Medb, the goddess-queen of Ireland, who weds each king in turn. The kings of Tara and Cruachain were inaugurated in an ancient fertility rite which took the form of a symbolical mating *(feis)* with the local earth-goddess. At Tara, this inauguration took place at *Feis Temro* (the *feis* or feast of Tara) held once in the reign of each king (Binchy 1958). When, in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, Medb offers her daughter Findabair to Long mac Emonis as wife and to sleep *(fes)* at all times in Cruachain, he is being offered possession of the province of Connacht (Carney 1973, 12).

In one recension of the tale of *Cath Muigi Rath* ('The Battle of Moira') three famous 'feasts' *(feiseanna)* are listed: '. . . these are the three feasts of Ireland: the feast of Emain, the feast of Tara and the feast of Cruachain' (Marstrander 1911, 233). Thus it seems that Rathcroghan was once an inauguration place, a *feis Chruachna,* about which we know nothing, being held there in the remote past.

The idea that a king was wedded to his territory is well known in Irish literature and O'Rahilly (1946a, 19) gives a list of later poetic references to Ireland as the 'wife' of one or other of her legendary or early historical kings including an early seventeenth century allusion to Cruachain as 'the ancient wife of the kings (of Connacht)'. Conversely, in the *Annals of Loch Cé* when Aedh, son of Cathall Dall, was killed after a mere fortnight of kingship in 1274 AD., it was declared: 'A fortnight was the descendant of Creidhe thus — As a husband to Cruachan' (Hennessy 1871, 475). In the same annals and in the *Annals of Connacht* there is a famous description of the inauguration of Feidhlim Ó Conchobhair as king of Connacht in 1310 AD. He was proclaimed king at Carnfree just over six kilometres (four miles) south-south-east of Rathcroghan:

'. . . in a style as royal, as lordly and as public as any of his race from the time of Brian son of Eochu Muigmedoin till that day. And when Fedlimid mac Aeda meic Eogain had married the Province of Connacht his foster-father waited upon him during the night in the manner remembered by the old men and recorded in the old books; and this was the most splendid king-ship marriage ever celebrated in Connacht down to that day' (Freeman 1944, 223).

This is an extraordinary echo of an archaic rite intended to ensure the fertility of man and beast and earth throughout the kingdom. The Feast of Tara was last held in 560 AD, after which it was discarded as a relic of paganism

(Binchy 1958, 136). Presumably the christianization of Connacht saw the end of the old rites at Rathcroghan too, if indeed they were still practised there at the time. About 800 AD, the author of the *Martyrology of Oengus* contrasts the flourishing Christian sites with the pagan centres which he claims are deserted:

'The fortress of Cruachain has vanished with Ailill, victory's child; a fair dignity greater than kingdoms is in the city of Clonmacnoise . . .' (Hughes 1972, 205).

The various details recorded about Rathcroghan in heroic narrative, hagiographical tract and annalistic compilation were more or less accepted as historical fact by later scholars such as Charles O'Conor of Belanagare in the eighteenth century. The same is true of more recent commentators such as H. T. Knox and local popular historians such as Rev. P. A. Sharkey for whom Rathcroghan 'was for seventy years the scene of the loves and wars of the renowned Queen Maeve during the first century before the Christian era . . .' (Sharkey 1927, 371). Nowadays students of early Irish literature are more cautious, the various sources are of unequal historical value, some obviously of no such value at all but a fruitful source for the student of mythology and anthropology. The literary references to Rathcroghan are very fragmentary and they have not yet been expertly studied. Among the fragments there may be grains of historical truth and their recognition will depend on patient scholarship and the combined research of linguist, historian, archaeologist and others. Even this cursory glance at the literary evidence, however, demonstrates that Rathcroghan was held to be of great importance in ancient times when it was remembered as the seat, cemetery and inauguration place of sacred kings. Its sacred character is also indicated by the fact that it was an important focus of mythological activity and a place of assembly, probably a tribal centre. As we have seen, its significance was repeatedly recognised by writers of the early Historic and Medieval periods.[1]

ANTIQUARIAN INTEREST IN RATHCROGHAN

A Strokestown clergyman named John Keogh, who was for a time a member of the Dublin Philosophical Society, has left us an early if uninformative reference to one of the archaeological monuments at Rathcroghan. In a short account of County Roscommon, which he wrote in 1684, he noted a Medieval moated site at Cloonfree near Strokestown (believed to be a royal site of the O'Conors: Quiggin 1914) which he described as 'a kind of fort four square . . . the wall whereof is only a green bank'. He was presumably alluding to the grassy nature of that earthwork when he continued: 'Rathcroughan is a like fort in the midst of the Maughary where a general assembly of all the principal men in Connaught was wont to be held to consult about the affairs of their state. We may term it the King of Connaught's parliament house or the Connacian Sanhedrin'. He was clearly familiar with the tradition of an assembly place but in merely placing Rathcroghan in the middle of Machaire Chonnacht left us none the wiser as to its precise location or the nature of the surviving remains.

The renowned Charles O'Conor of Belanagare (1710-1791) seems to have been the first person to describe one of the Rathcroghan monuments in sufficient detail to permit identification today. In referring to Mag nAí in the first edition (1753) of his *Dissertations on the Ancient History of Ireland* he declared:

'In this latter territory stood Drum Druid, famous for its great Cave and Druidic Rites, a Place which, long before Ptolomey's Time, got the name of Croghan, where the States of Connaught assembled, and where Eochy Feylogh

erected the celebrated Rath in the Time of Augustus Caesar'.

Of the burial customs of the ancient Irish, he wrote:

'We never read of burning their dead Bodies, but find frequent Mention of their Interment, of which the two Royal Cemeteries of Brugh-Boyne and Cruachain are illustrious instances. This last called Relig na Riogh lies a little to the South of the Rath of Cruachain, so celebrated in former Ages for its Provincial Assemblies, and for being the Inauguration Place of the Kings of Connaught: It is of circular Form, surrounded with a Stone Ditch, greatly defaced; and I have measured 116 Paces in its Diameter. It is now remarkable for Nothing more than being the Repository of so many of our Heathen Kings, especially Dathias, the last of them, whose Corpse was carried thither from the Foot of the Alps, in the Year 429'.

A footnote adds: 'In the Area are some ruined Ditches of the same make with the surrounding Periphery, one running quite across the Diameter, others oblique; and some intersecting each other; what the Design of these may be we are left to guess: In other Parts are Heaps of coarse Stones piled over one another, and seem to show the Graves of the Persons interred'. (O'Conor 1753, 129, 179).

Mention of the famous cave and a shorter description of the circular enclosure called 'Relignaree' or 'the cemetery of the kings' also occur in the second edition of the *Dissertations* (O'Conor 1766, 114, 178). Charles O'Conor of Belanagare had a life-long interest in the promotion of the study of Irish history and antiquities and had a shrewd appreciation of the potential of ancient monuments to shed light on the distant past. His equation of Rathcroghan with the Cruachain of early Irish literature is significant, as indeed is his reference to only three sites, the Rath of Cruachain, the cave and the presumed cemetery. In the year 1773 he became an honorary member of Charles Vallancey's short-lived Antiquarian Committee of the Dublin Society (O'Conor 1949). William Burton Conyngham seems to have tried to revive this dormant group in 1779 and two years later Vallancey described him as the president of the Hibernian Antiquarian Society about which virtually nothing is known. A letter (preserved in the National Library of Ireland) from Charles O'Conor to Burton Conyngham refers to the aims of this new society; it also reveals O'Conor's continuing interest in Rathcroghan and his discernment in antiquarian matters:

'Sir,
I can not give a better proof of the Sense I have of the honour you have done me in your letter of the 5th instant than by being as assistant as I can in your scheme of bringing to light all that can be recovered of the Antiquities of this Country. To search into our Carns, Raths and other ancient structures above ground, as well as into our artificial caves (structures under ground) is to begin well. Such a Search would not, I conceive, end in the Gratification of bare Curiosity; It may lead to useful knowledge also, by giving us as far as it will go, a true idea of the state of Arts, and consequently of Manners in the earlier Ages of Civil Government in Ireland. It pains me to inform you that in my Country, beyond the Shannon, I know of none who concerns himself in Such Matters. Rath Croghan, the place of the Election and Inauguration of our Provincial Kings, is within three miles of my own house, and within half a mile of that Rath lies the Interment place of the Irish Heathen Kings. I conceived a strong desire to open that Cemetery, and yet I desisted thro' a well grounded apprehension of being exposed to the Ridicule of my Neighbours. Such an Association of Antiquaries as you propose, would undoubtedly remove the inconsiderate prejudice to such Searches, and your taking the lead in the Association would give vigour to every Inquiry. A critical Review of our ancient Writings would come on of course, and enable us to discover the true Era of Authentic History, by separating the fabulous from the Historical. Mr. Irwin of Tanrego can be very useful to your Draughtsman and I doubt not but he has already explored the famous artificial Cave which lies at some distance from his house. When I return to the County of Roscommon I shall be active in picking up every Information that may in any degree be useful to your Scheme and be assured that I am

Dear Sir,
Your very grateful and very obedient Servant
Ch. O'Conor
From No. 48 Pill-lane
April 10, 1779.'

William Burton Conyngham was a notable patron of antiquarian research and it was he who was responsible for the provincial tours of Gabriel Beranger and others to draw and record Irish antiquities. Rathcroghan was visited in 1779 and William Wilde (1871, 245) has published Beranger's account of his excursion. On August 4th the visitors set out in the company of their host Charles O'Conor and in the words of Beranger: 'went to Rathcroghan, an artificial mound, where the ancient Kings of Ireland were inaugurated, and also kept their provincial assemblies, 400 feet in diameter at the top. Drew and section'. According to Wilde, in this pen and ink sketch Beranger made the monument to be 1350 feet in circumference at the bottom, the slope to the top 33 and the circular elevation at the centre 6 feet above the surface. These measurements are misleading for Beranger miscalculated the diameter of the monument. A copy of his plan and section is preserved in a scrap-book of the eighteenth century antiquary Austin Cooper and a pencilled tracing of this drawing is to be found among the copies of the Cooper manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland. Two almost identical views of Rathcroghan by Beranger are preserved in the Royal Irish Academy. His caption to the larger of these two water-colours (Plate 1) reads 'Rath Craughan or Croghan, County of Roscommon, on which the ancient Kings of Connaught were inaugurated and on which they kept their provincial assemblies, it is an artificial mount made of earth and of a circular form all covered with grass and in very good order, it stands in a large field and has a gentle slope of an easy ascent all round it. The diameter at the top is 400 feet, and at bottom 450 being 1350 in circumference. The slope is 33 feet. It has in the centre of the top, a small mount whose top has only 6 feet diameter, on which it is supposed the king had his station. There is no sign of remains of any stone buildings on the whole spot of ground'. A note with the second, smaller drawing repeats these details. Since the diameter of the upper part of the mound is actually some 200 feet, Beranger's depiction of the monument is disproportionately broad in relation to its height. Wilde's statement that the small mound on the summit was 6 feet high is also incorrect through, judging from Beranger's drawing, it was clearly more prominent in 1779 than it is today (Plate 2:1).

The visitors were next brought to the cave of Cruachain and Beranger's description is as follows:

'We found there some men waiting for us; and having lighted some candles we descended first on all fours through a narrow gallery, which for the length of 12 or 14 feet is the work of man, being masonry said to be done by the Druids, who performed here some of their secret rites. A yard or two further we could walk erect, the cave being seven or eight feet high, and about 4 feet broad; the walls and roof (work of nature), of a brownish colour, smooth and shining, as if varnished, the ground of solid rock, like the rest, smooth, always descending; but the uneveness not unlike steps favouring our descent, and preventing us from slipping. We went about the length of 150 yards when we found our career to be at an end, the cave going no further. We examined closely, but solid rock was everywhere — no door, window nor crevice, where the women and her calf could pass; we commented on the story, and joked the country people on their belief; but the answer was that the devil had stopped it up, and this statement we could not contradict conveniently'.
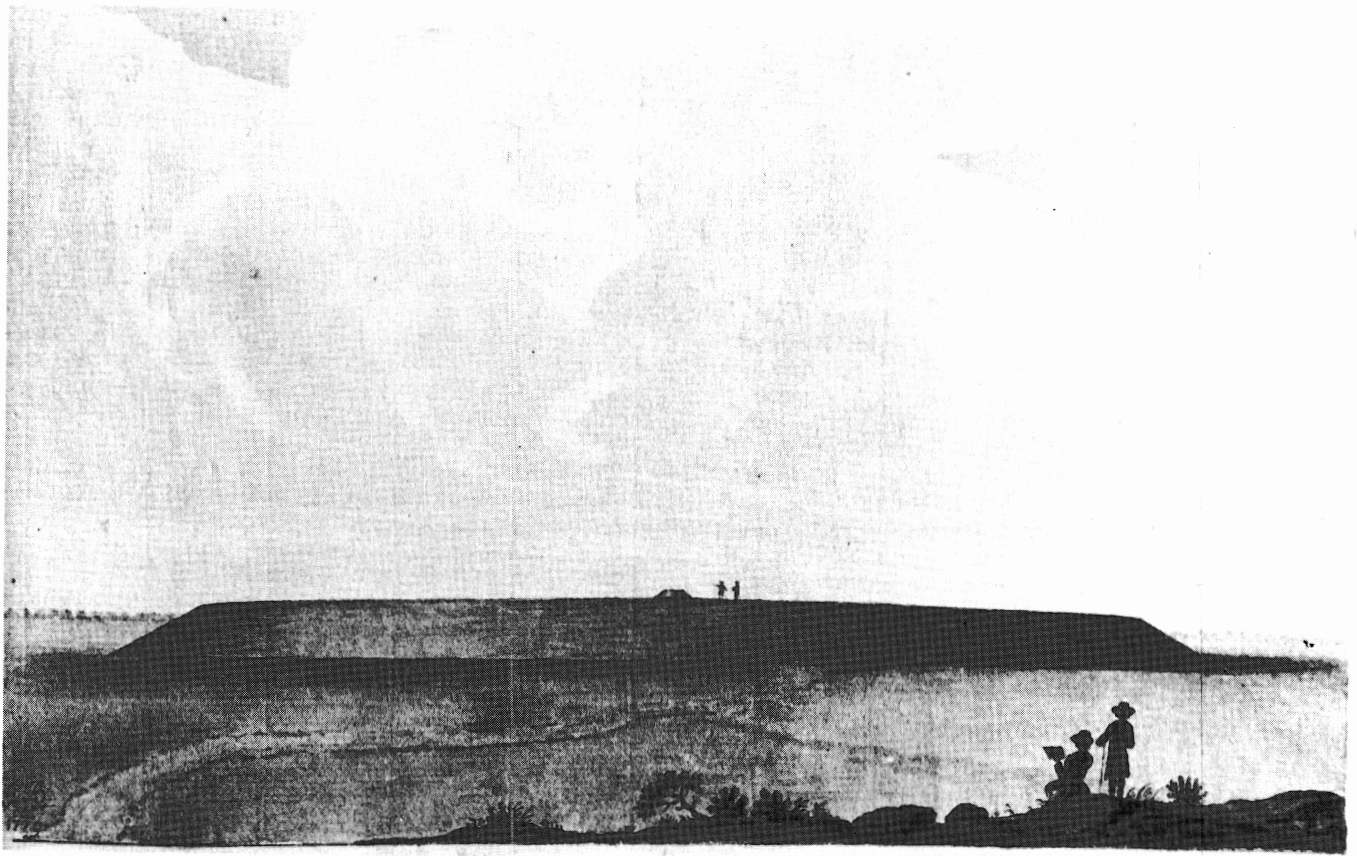
Plate 1. A view of the great mound at Rathcroghan by Gabriel Beranger, 1779.

This latter reference is to a tale they had heard in June when visiting the caves at Keshcorran, near Ballymote, Co. Sligo. A woman was said to have been dragged into the cave at Rathcroghan by an unruly calf and to her amazement to have come out at Keshcorran some twenty miles away the following day.

Several of the Rathcroghan monuments are marked on the Grand Jury map of this part of Co. Roscommon completed by William Edgeworth in 1817. Only the great mound of Rathcroghan itself, the enclosure known as Relignaree and a 'cave' (probably Oweynagat) are named. Further details about some of the ancient remains at Rathcroghan are provided by John O'Donovan who visited the area in 1837 as part of his work for the Ordnance Survey who mapped the major monuments (six-inch sheets nos. 21 and 22). He collected the local names for some dozen monuments around the great mound of Rathcroghan described by Beranger and these are the names given them today. On the occasion of his visit he was accompanied by Matthew O'Conor, the grandson of Charles O'Conor of Belanagare, and learnt of what seems to be the first recorded archaeological investigation there. According to O'Donovan (1837, 87; 1851, 205) one of several grassy mounds within the circular enclosure known as Relignaree (following the spelling of the Ordnance Survey) had been dug by Charles O'Conor of Mount Allen (1736 - 1808) who was the second son of Charles of Belanagare and an uncle of Matthew O'Conor. This investigation revealed 'a square chamber and some bones', the chamber was still to be seen when O'Donovan visited the site. This early and quite unscientific examination clearly took place some time after Charles O'Conor's letter of 1779 quoted above. O'Donovan also drew attention to a monument a short distance from the supposed royal cemetery, this was 'a small enclosure with a tumulus in the centre, and on the top of the tumulus a very remarkable red sand stone

which marks the grave of Dathi, the last pagan monarch of Ireland . . .' (O'Donovan 1837, 87). Charles O'Conor of Belanagare, it will be remembered, had placed this Dathi in Relignaree but O'Donovan was familiar with a seventeenth century statement which declared that a red stone marked this individual's grave in the cemetery. A little later, however, he was somewhat more cautious writing 'tradition at present has no recollection of its marking the grave of Dathi' (O'Donovan 1844, 24).

George Petrie published his famous essay on the origins and uses of round towers in 1845. In refuting the claim that these monuments were pagan burial places, he cited the references to pagan cemeteries in the medieval *Lebor na hUidre* mentioned above: 'Oenach Cruachain, in the first place, it was there the race of Heremon, *i.e.* the kings of Tara, were used to bury until the time of Cremhthann, the son of Lughaidh Riabh-n-derg . . .' *etc.* He also drew attention to that seventeenth century reference to the burial of Dathi which comes from Dubhaltach Óg Mac Fhirbhisigh's *Book of the Genealogies of Ireland:*

'The body of Dathi was brought to Cruachan, and it was interred at Relig na riogh at Cruachan, where most of the kings of the race of Heremon were buried, and where to this day the Red Pillar Stone remains as a stone monument over his grave near Rath Cruachan, to this time, 1666'.

Unaware of the historical unreliability of the medieval sources and heedless of the thousand year gap between the death of this Dathi and Mac Fhirbhisigh's statement, few of Petrie's readers would have had any misgivings about these records.

The antiquarians R. R. Brash and John Windele examined the principal remains at Rathcroghan in August 1852 but Brash's account of this visit was only published posthumously over twenty-five years later in 1879. He was the first to record an ogham inscription in Oweynagat but otherwise his report adds little to that of

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O'Donovan. Samuel Ferguson, a significant figure in the nineteenth century revival of interest in Irish literary and antiquarian studies, visited Rathcroghan in September 1864. At Oweynagat, eager to explore the inner cave, he left his wife a short distance inside the entrance. She, having sensibly lit a candle, discovered markings on the edge of one of the roof stones of the artificial part of the cave. To Ferguson's delight this was an ogham inscription — in fact it was that found but not published by Brash. Ferguson found a second ogham inscription on another stone nearby. On his return to Dublin the next morning, discovering one letter in his rubbing of the first inscription to be indistinct, he promptly caught the night train back to Roscommon and was at work in the cave by noon the following day (M. Ferguson 1896, Vol. 2, 47). He quickly presented his findings to the Royal Irish Academy (Ferguson 1864). He provided a sketch plan of a circular enclosure around the entrance to the cave and details of the two ogham inscriptions therein, one of which he read as FRAICCI MAQI MEDFFI meaning '(The stone of) Fraic son of Medf'. Though confessing some slight scepticism, he was very struck by what appeared to him to be proof of a historical Medb. He commented: 'we are impressed, perhaps awe-struck, with the possible presence of a memorial to the Helen . . . of Irish epic romance' (Ferguson 1887, 58). Since the ogham stone was incorporated as a roof stone in the artificial part of the cave, he thought it may have originally stood in nearby Relignaree. Rhys confirmed this reading of the inscription in 1898.

On the occasion of his 1864 visit, Ferguson also drew a plan of the so-called Relignaree which he later published with brief description along with a sketch of the nearby mound and standing stone which he too believed marked the grave of Dathi (Ferguson 1872). His discoveries at Rathcroghan and his enthusiastic interest in the tale of Dathi's supposed foray to the Continent induced him to attempt to follow that warrior's footsteps through Switzerland and the upper valley of the Rhine and to publish a paper on the legend (Ferguson 1882). The legend of Dathi was evidently a popular one, it even moved Thomas Davis to pen 'The Fate of King Dathi', part of which runs:

'See ye that countless train
Crossing Ros-Comain's plain
Crying, like hurricane,
Uile liú ai? –
Broad is his cairn's base
Nigh the "Kings' burial place"
Last of the Pagan race,
Lieth king Dathi.

Few would now share Ferguson's belief in the essential historical truthfulness of the stories of medieval scribes (O'Rahilly 1946, 213). Indeed a measure of the change in general opinion is the difference between Ferguson's Medb, whom he compared to Helen of Troy, and the intoxicating fertility goddess of more recent scholarship.

The most detailed account to date of the antiquities at Rathcroghan was published by H. T. Knox in several confused and confusing papers. In 1911 he briefly described, with plans and sections, five monuments in the complex using (except in one case) the names recorded for them by O'Donovan. These were the large mound known as 'Rathcroghan', two enclosures named 'Rathnadarve' and 'Rathmore', and two burial mounds 'Rathbeg' and 'Little Rathbeg' — the latter unfortunate name was coined by Knox for a hitherto unrecorded site. In 1914 he published a general map of the area (a modified version of the first edition of the six-inch Ordnance Survey sheets nos. 21 and 22) and briefly commented on a further thirty or so monuments sometimes giving a not very accurate plan. His work is valuable, however, in so far as it records some dozen monuments not included on the first edition

of the Ordnance Survey maps; most of these are to be found on the second and revised editions. In all, Knox's survey of the complex of monuments records half a dozen enclosures, eight burial mounds, several other earthworks, several 'avenues' or ancient road-ways, a complex of ancient field systems, and, a short distance south of Rathcroghan, the remains of a megalithic tomb.

When Knox communicated the results of his work to the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Dublin in September 1913, he urged the archaeological investigation of the monuments. Unknown to him some excavation had just been quietly completed at Rathcroghan. Unfortunately, with the exception of several passing references to these investigations by R. A. S. Macalister, no account of them has ever been published. In his *Archaeology of Ireland* (1928, 179; 1949, 308) he declares that the identification of 'Relignaree' is certainly erroneous: 'excavation within the area has shown that the enclosure is not a cemetery at all, but a mere cattle-pen' and in the case of Dathi's burial mound 'again, excavation has upset a superficial identification. The mound is not a burial mound at all, but has been scarped out of a much larger esker. There is no trace of any burial under the pillar . . .' In his report on his excavations at Uisneach (Macalister and Praeger 1928, 74) he wrote that he was present at 'Relignaree' when an excavation 'was conducted there in 1911 *(sic)* by the late Sir William Ridgeway and the late Dr. Quiggin of Cambridge. It was carried out in a rather desultory fashion, but at least its results suggested grave doubts of the Rathcroghan enclosure having been a cemetery at all'.

Two letters preserved among the O'Conor papers in Clonalis House, Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, shed a little further light on these activities. The first is from the Cambridge philologist E. C. Quiggin to the O'Conor Don, dated August 30th 1913, informing him of the proposed excavation and advising him that 'it would be well if the matter were not talked about until the party arrived'. The party in question was to arrive the following week and would include Professor and Mrs. Ridgeway, Dr. W. M. Tapp, Professor R. A. S. Macalister and E. C. R. Armstrong. The second, from Douglas Hyde, also to the O'Conor Don, is dated September 12th 1913:

'I went up to see the antiquarians at work a day or two ago. They are much disappointed! Rellig-na-ree the "Kings' burial place" turned out to be the foundations of 17th or 18th century cabins! There was no sign of burial under Daithi's big sand-stone monolith. All their results had been negative ones. They now believe that Daithi's pillar stone is an old religious stone or an inauguration stone, and marks no burial place and that "Rellig-na-ree" is the entire plain for miles round, each tumulus marking the burial place of a King or a family of Kings, the great mound of all being no exception and nothing but a burial place. They were all to go away today or tomorrow but may come back next year to tackle the big mound of all! I expressed your regret that you were away and could be of no service to them. There were four men and two ladies. Unless they found something to keep them yesterday they will be off by this time'.

Regrettably no more details are given and the extent and exact location of the diggings in 'Relignaree' for example are unknown. The plans to return to investigate the great mound at Rathcroghan the following year came to naught, the more momentous events of August 1914 contributed to their cancellation.[2]

Most of the ancient monuments at Rathcroghan were taken into State care in the 1930's. Today all but a dozen of the various monuments listed by Knox are National Monuments: the vested monuments comprise seventeen sites in Glenballythomas townland and seven in Toberrory townland.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Because the name Cruachain may variously refer to a

royal site or to the rolling countryside of Mag nAí and because early literature and popular tradition tell us so little about Cruachain's monumental remains, the identification of both its exact location and its extent presents problems. The limestone pastures of Mag nAí or Machaire Chonnacht are rich in earthworks and whether some or all of these should be included as part of one great complex of monuments remains uncertain. Indeed even the Rathcroghan identified by more modern writers has been questioned: O'Donovan (1837, 100, 114) has recorded a claim by a Brian MacDermot that a hill near the village of Croghan, north of Elphin, was the true site of Cruachain. O'Donovan, however, failed to find any earthworks on or near the small but prominent rounded hill in question. Knox (1911, 95) assumed that the MacDermots were inaugurated at this spot and reported what he thought might be a small mound on the summit. Today a modern concrete water tank crowns the hill and nothing survives to suggest any ancient activity there or in the immediate vicinity. The nearest monument is a defaced circular earthwork of uncertain antiquity over 500m away and it cannot be said that archaeology supports that nineteenth century claim.

The numerical wealth of ancient remains in the Rathcroghan area testifies to its past importance but their nature and distribution has occasioned comment. The royal sites of Tara and Emain Macha each include a great hill-top enclosure, sometimes mis-called a hillfort, which consists of a circular or oval area encompassed by an earthen rampart with internal ditch. No such monument has been recognised at Rathcroghan and to some writers, therefore, the Connacht site is peculiarly different. In a very curious statement Byrne (1973, 83) has declared that 'Cruachu is not a hillfort such as Tara, Ailech or Ailenn, but a concentration of large ringforts arranged in military fashion as a large encampment (sic) on a slight eminence commanding a wide view of Mag nAí . . .' As we shall see Rathcroghan is much more than a collection of ringforts and the enclosures there, all of unknown date, hardly merit this strange description; furthermore the differences between this complex and Tara may be less significant than they seem. Dillon and Chadwick were also struck by the scattered character of the Rathcroghan monuments and were moved to offer a quite inaccurate comparison between this site and Stanwick, the Yorkshire tribal centre of the Brigantes. Of the latter they wrote (1967, 22): 'their tribal capital, Stanwick . . . extended over an area of 850 acres of lowland enclosed in more than six miles of rampart and ditch, and its widespread and diffuse character is comparable to the early tribal centres of Gaul, comparable also to Cruachain, the capital of Queen Medb in early Connacht'.

Rathcroghan today is a collection of several different types of monument. The earthworks there are scattered over some 1000 hectares (four square miles) of elevated ground and they are not enclosed by any ramparts. In spite of this unenclosed and scattered distribution, it is still possible tentatively to define the limits of the complex. Knox's map of 1914 included monuments in some four townlands and was based in part on the work of John O'Donovan and the Ordnance Survey over seventy years before. For the most part, the monuments listed by O'Donovan and Knox do seem to form a group distinguishable from other earthworks in the general area of Mag nAí. This Rathcroghan group comprises a series of enclosures, burial mounds and other earthworks clustered towards the eastern end of a broad limestone plateau which slopes gently away to the east and south. Carnfree can just be detected on the horizon a little over six kilometres (some four miles) to the south-south-east and the hills of Slieve Bawn dominate the eastern horizon beyond Strokestown. Rolling pasture lies to the west and north. Ringforts are a fairly conspicuous feature of the countryside as a whole but in the Rathcroghan area they

and related earthworks and other monuments form a remarkable concentration just on or above the 122m (400 foot) contour (Fig. 1). It is this combination of certain types of monuments in an elevated position which distinguishes the Rathcroghan complex and which affords some comparisons with sites as varied as Tara in Co. Meath and nearby Carnfree. In the following account the ancient monuments are numbered and thus identified on the general plan (Fig. 1) and on the relevant plates.

'Rathcroghan mound'

At the approximate centre of the complex (Fig. 1:1) stands the great circular mound here called 'Rathcroghan mound'. Though not a ringfort or rath, this is clearly the 'Rathcroghan' of Charles O'Conor in 1753 and has been so called by nineteenth century and subsequent writers. Both its purpose and the antiquity of its name are uncertain. Knox (1911, 98) has published a plan and section and tentatively assumed that a royal residence once stood on top of it. Macalister (1928, 254), like O'Conor, believed it to have been an inauguration or assembly mound and Orpen (1911, 274) thought it a burial mound used for ceremonial purposes. Harbison (1970, 209) and Wailes (1982, 13) have speculated that it might contain a passage tomb and Evans (1966, 184) considered it a natural glacial hillock scarped to its present shape. The mound (Plate 2:1) is broad, low and approximately circular with an average basal diameter of some 88m. From its base it slopes fairly steeply at first and then, at a point where the diameter is about 65m, it slopes very gently to an almost flat summit about 32m across. This flat area is delimited at least in part by what seems to be the remains of a low bank within which there is a low, irregularly oval, mound measuring about 5m by 4m. Knox thought there was a slight ditch around this small mound. Because the great mound seems to straddle a low glacial ridge, its height appears greater from certain angles: on its northern side it is about 4m in height. It is at least partly artificial: in 1981 a small area of loose stone-work was visible on a denuded part of the upper slope on the north-east. Two slight depressions occur on the north-east and north-north-eastern slopes and two larger sloping ramps occur on the west and east respectively. Knox (1914, 7) declared that these were due to the passage of cattle and he also thought that the slight bank on the top was the remains of a rampart. O'Donovan (1837, 86) stated that the mound was once surrounded by ramparts and contained a round chamber but there is no evidence to support this tale. The great mound as well as the faint features on its summit remain a puzzle. It is possible that the small mound and bank may be a degraded ring-barrow (Duignan 1967, 408) or perhaps the remains of an embanked tumulus like 'Rathscreg' (Plate 18:39). If it is a burial mound then the hypothesis that the great mound was a settlement site is an unlikely one though its use for ceremonial purposes is still a possibility.

There are other monuments in the immediate vicinity. Knox thought there was a rectangular enclosure to the south-west of the great mound but this, as the aerial photograph indicates, seems to be a field-bank running roughly east to west; a long narrow depression abuts it at its western end. In 1837 O'Donovan recorded the existence of two large stones to the north-west of 'Rathcroghan mound'; one, named 'Milleen Meva' (Fig. 1:2) is a sub-rectangular lump of limestone measuring about 1.70 by 1.20 by 0.80m and the other is a prostrate limestone pillar named 'Miosgan Meva' (no. 3) which measures 2.90m in length and 0.50m to 0.60m in width and thickness. According to Brash, in 1852 the former rock was known as the 'Milleen' and a local tradition claimed that it had been brought from Elphin by Oisin who 'would draw any man from the road by the breath of his nostrils' (Brash 1879, 300). Miosgán Medba (Medb's
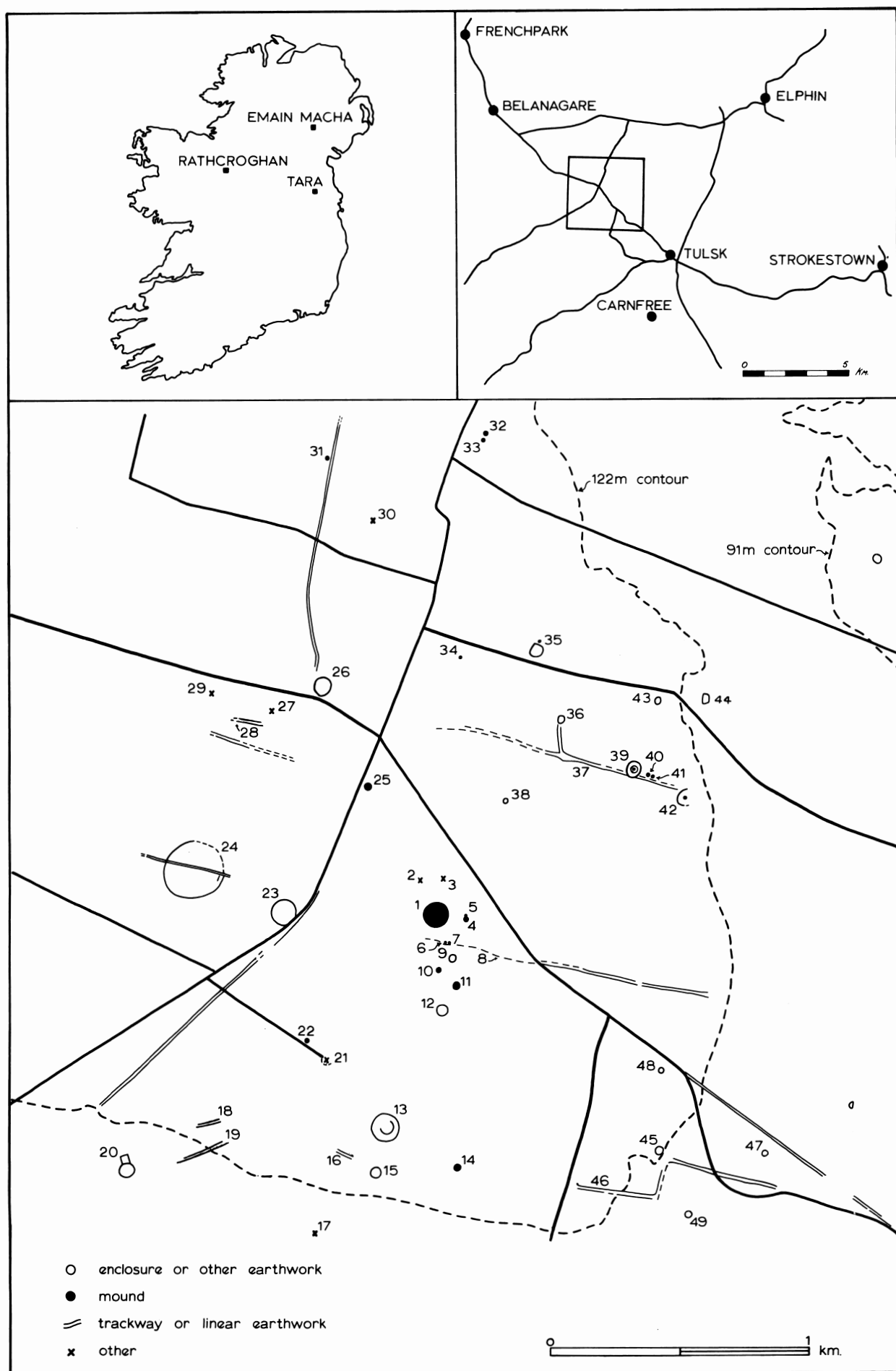
EMAIN MACHA

RATHCROGHAN

TARA

FRENCHPARK

BELANAGARE

ELPHIN

TULSK

STROKESTOWN

CARNFREE

0   5 Km.

122m contour

91m contour

31

33 32

30

34.

35

29 x

26

43 o   □ 44

27

28

36

25

39 40

37   41

38   42

24

2 x   x 3

23

1   5
        4

6   7
  9 o   8

10   11

12 O

22

21

13

48 o

18

19

20   45   47 o

16   15   14

46

49

17

O   enclosure or other earthwork

●   mound

⫸   trackway or linear earthwork

x   other

0   1 km.

Fig. 1. General plan of Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon (based on Ordnance Survey 1:10560 sheets 21 and 22 by permission of the Government).
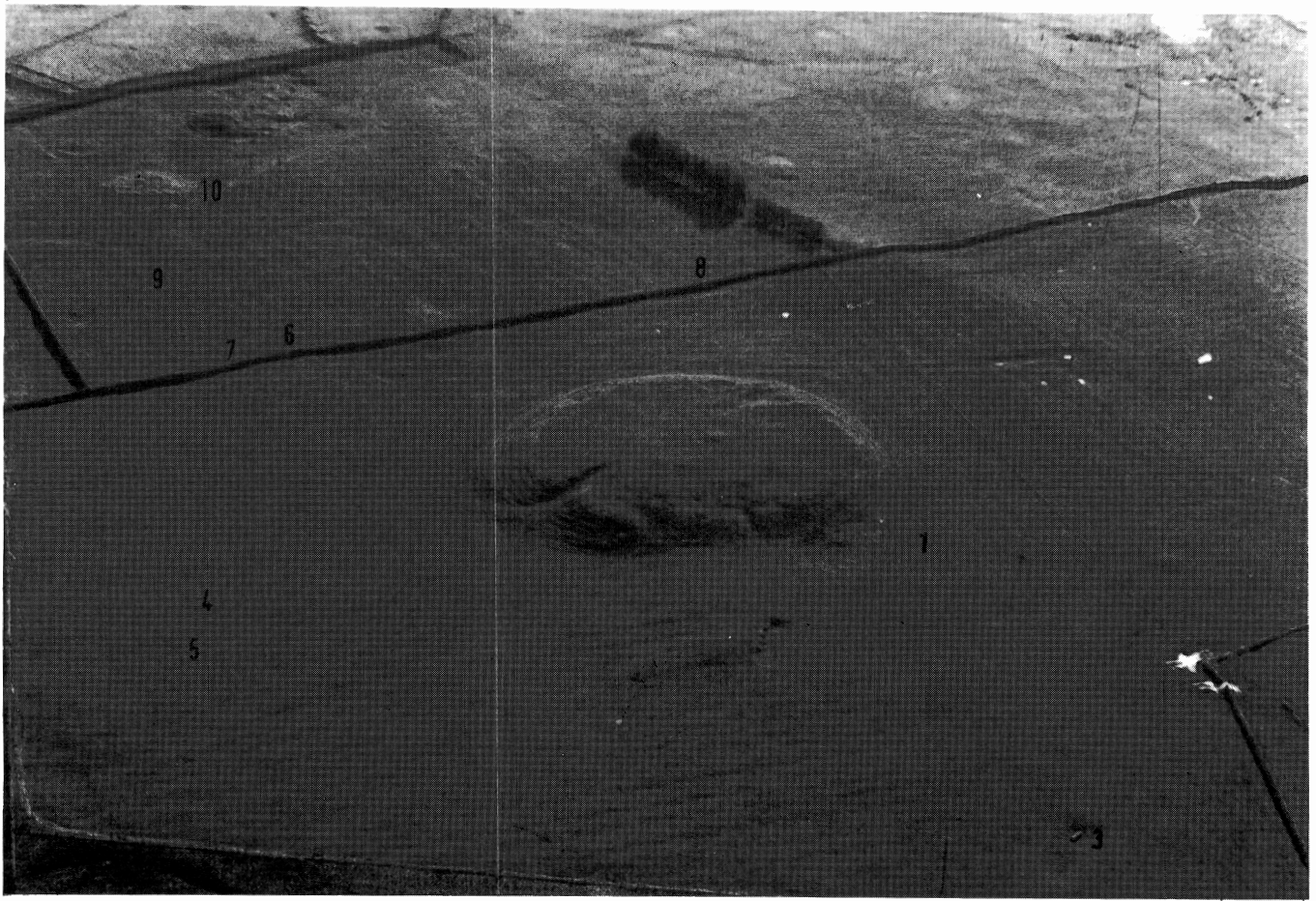
Plate 2. 'Rathcroghan mound' (1) and monuments in its vicinity from north-east (March 17th, 1982).

heap) is a name also given to the huge cairn on Knocknarea near Sligo. Orpen (1911, 272) thought it more likely that this name was originally applied to the great mound but, of course, evidence is lacking. Knox recorded a low ring-barrow (his 'ring no. 1') some 60m to the east of 'Rathcroghan mound'. This (Plate 2:4) is an almost imperceptible mound surrounded by what seems to be a shallow ditch with an external bank, it has an overall diameter of about 26m. Knox thought there was another ditch outside the bank but a very slight rise in the ground beyond the monument may have inspired this suggestion. The site is only visible on the ground in favourable conditions when grass is low and lighting oblique and, not surprisingly, its identification as a ring-barrow must be tentative. Better preserved ring-barrows do occur at Rathcroghan (*e.g.* Plate 11) with mound, ditch and external bank but with poorly defined sites it is always possible that they will prove, on excavation, to be something else such as small enclosures or house-sites. However, one indication that this site, no. 4, is probably a ring-barrow is provided by aerial photography which shows a small ring-ditch or ring-barrow (no. 5) immediately to the north with a possible diameter of some 8m. A ring-barrow and a much smaller mound with ditch were similarly juxtaposed in the Carrowjames tumulus cemetery in Co. Mayo (Raftery 1940, 17). Two other small ring-barrows (Plate 2:6 and 7) lie about 60m south-east of 'Rathcroghan mound'. Hitherto unrecorded, they have an overall diameter of 6 to 7m, and seem to be situated on or near what may be an ancient trackway (no. 8), marked as such on Knox's plan and on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey map. Only part of it is detectable today and it is obscured by a stone field wall.

To the south are three monuments of uncertain type (Plate 3:9, 10 and 11). One is a broad, roughly circular ditched enclosure (no. 9) revealed by aerial photography: a shallow ditch about 3m wide on average encloses an

area some 45m in diameter, a slight rise inside the ditch on the south could be the remains of a bank. The other two are possibly burial mounds, one lies just south-west of no. 9 and it is a low stoney mound (no. 10) about 21m in diameter apparently situated on a small hillock; Knox (1914, 29) called this 'cashel no. 3'. The other (no. 11) is greatly defaced, it is a roughly circular mound obscured by field walls and damaged by some quarrying on the north-west; it is about 34m in diameter and may occupy a natural rise in the ground. Again Knox, probably mistakenly, called this a cashel (his no. 2).

A short distance to the south is the first monument which may, in all probability, be described as a settlement (Plate 3:12). This is an enclosure of approximately circular shape with an earthen bank 5 to 6m wide and an external ditch 3.5 to 4m wide. A stretch of bank on its southern side is fairly straight, elsewhere it curves in normal ringfort fashion; the average internal diameter is 38m. This is Knox's 'rath no. 1'. A series of old field banks skirt this enclosure and link it to a complex of ancient fields which extend west and south-west in the general direction of 'Relignaree' (no. 13). The date of this field system is unknown, it may be no more than several centuries old for some settlement in the Rathcroghan area is recorded in the late sixteenth century. When Red Hugh O'Donnell plundered this part of Connacht in 1595, his seventeenth century biographer, Lughaidh O'Clery, records the arrival of the host at *Cruachan Rioghraith Aoi* ('Cruachain, the royal fort of Ai'). He mentions the existence of houses and dwellings 'close in the neighbour-hood' of the fort and describes how O'Donnell's marauders dispersed in various directions 'from the hill of the royal fort' (Murphy 1893, 79).

'Relignaree'

Ferguson included a sketch-plan of the enclosure called

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Plate 3. *Monuments and field system to the south of 'Rathcroghan mound' (1). 'Relignaree' (13) and 'Dathi's mound' (14) are visible in the distance. (Photograph: J.K. St. Joseph, Cambridge University Collection, July 8th, 1964).*
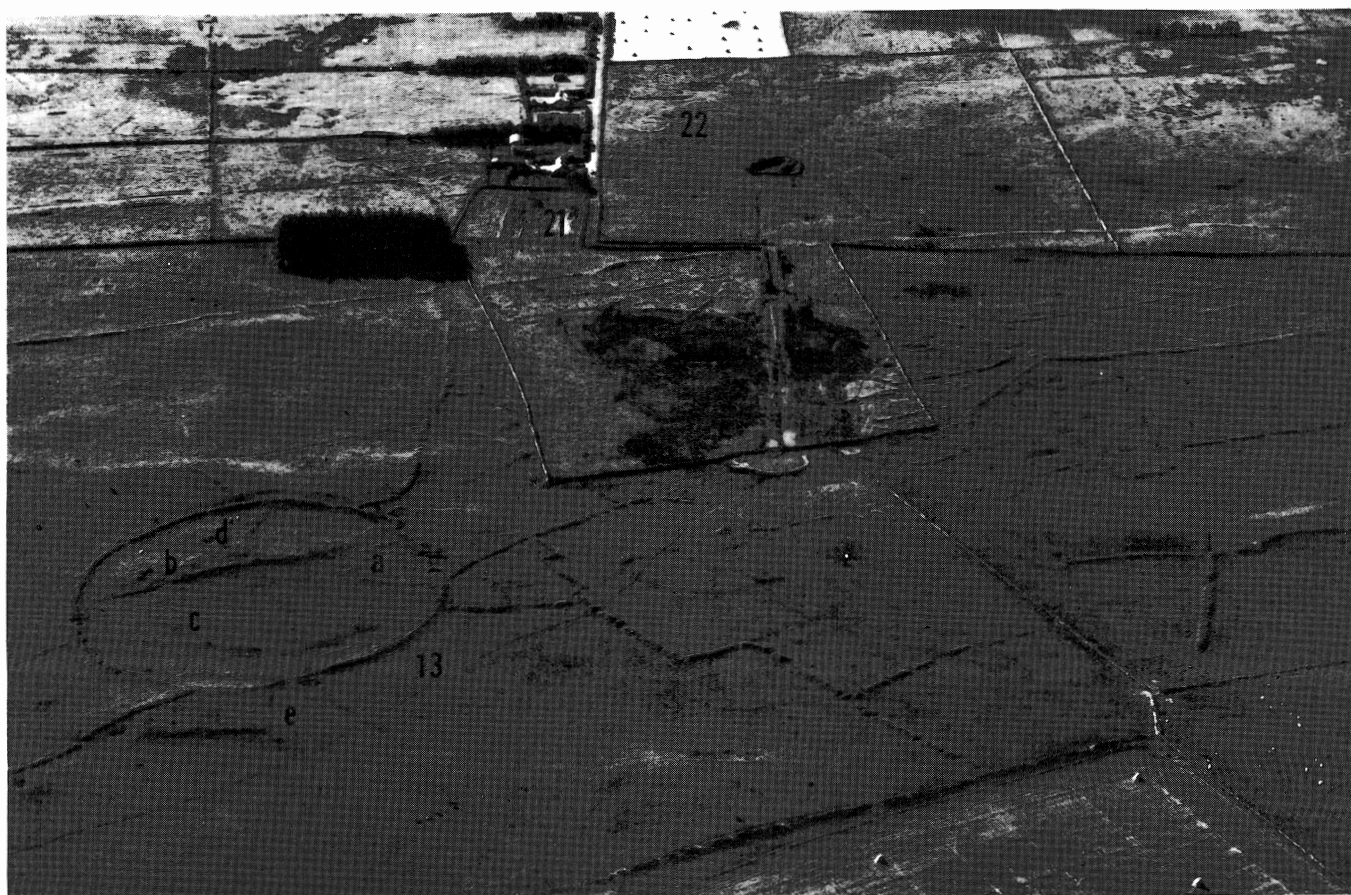

Plate 4. *'Relignaree' (13) and field system from the east. (Photograph: J.K. St. Joseph, Cambridge University Collection, July 14th, 1968).*

'Relignaree' (Plate 4:13) in his 1872 paper on ancient Irish cemeteries and a general aerial view has also been published (Norman and St. Joseph 1969, 66). This monument is a large univallate enclosure of circular plan with an internal diameter of 100m; there is no visible external ditch for most of its circumference; on the north-west, however, there is a segment of ditch some 6m wide and 50cm deep. This ditch has been cut where the ground rises outside the bank and its purpose was probably to increase the distance between the rising ground and the monument. The bank seems to be built of large stones and earth and is about 2.60m wide and 1m in height; there are over a dozen gaps in it, most of them probably due to cattle and none certainly recognisable as an entrance. In the interior there are traces of a smaller circular enclosure whose bank is concentric with the larger circle. In places this bank is 50 to 100cm high, it is clearly visible from the air for some four-fifths of its circumference and on the east shows traces of an external ditch. This small enclosure has an internal diameter of about 48m and it is difficult to say whether or not it is an earlier monument superceded by the larger one. Several field banks run across the large site, the major ones dividing it into four unequal parts, and in one instance on the east a bank continues on beyond the limits of the enclosure. Other internal features include traces of at least three rectangular houses (A - C) measuring respectively about 7 by 5m, 10 by 7m and 10 by 6m externally. A souterrain (D) is also visible in the south-western quadrant; this underground structure is about 2m wide and is built of dry-masonry and roofed with large slabs, its full extent is unknown. This is possibly 'the square chamber' found by Charles O'Conor of Mount Allen over 150 years ago. Since these souterrains are frequently associated with ringforts of the first millenium AD, and were probably used for refuge or storage purposes, the finding of some bones (probably animal) is not surprising. The presence of a souterrain here suggests that one or other or both of the enclosures should be considered a settlement of the early Historic period.[3] The rectangular house foundations, one of which (C) is situated on the bank of the smaller enclosure, may even be of more recent date, perhaps part of the sixteenth century settlement mentioned above. It seems that the history of 'Relignaree', while apparently not a funerary one, may have been long and complex. It was even used in relatively recent times as a cattle-pen. William Wilde, who was born in Castlerea in 1815, records that as a boy he used to visit the great 'Rath of Crohan' near the famous cave and witnessed the driving of all the black cattle from the surrounding plains to the great fort on May morning. Here they were to be bled for the benefit of their health 'while crowds of country people, having brought turf for firing, sat around, and cooked the blood mixed with oaten meal, and when they could be procured, onions and scallions' (Wilde 1871, 136, 248). The therapeutic bleeding of living cattle is an ancient practise and seems to have been a widespread custom of early summer which became part of May Day ceremonies connected with cattle; such bleeding is recorded in a sixteenth century manuscript containing a fragmentary recension of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in which the blood was drunk by the warriors of Medb (C. O'Rahilly 1977).

Immediately outside 'Relignaree' on the south-east, a puzzling sub-rectangular mound (E) adjoins the bank of the enclosure near a gap which Ferguson thought to be a possible entrance. In 1864 he recorded the name *'cnocán na gcorp'* for this mound though he was aware that according to O'Donovan (1844, 24) this name had also been conferred on 'Dathi's mound' nearby which is so named on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey map. There was clearly some confusion in O'Donovan's mind for in other references to 'Relignaree' he too applies the name 'hillock of the corpses' to the adjacent mound (1837, 87; 1851, 205); the latter name is probably as fanciful as the former. The mound, which is at least partly artificial, measures about 33 by 18m and is about 1m high.

'Dathi's mound'

The monument which was variously called 'Dathi's Stone' and 'Dathi's Monument' by Knox is situated some 240m south-east of 'Relignaree' and like the latter was, as we have seen, of particular interest to antiquarians because of its alleged royal associations. Opinions as to the exact nature of this site (Plate 5, no.14) have differed. To mention but two, O'Donovan (1837, 87; 1851, 205) described it as 'a small enclosure with a tumulus in the centre and on top of the tumulus is a very remarkable Red Sand Stone' and Westropp (1901, 642) called it 'a small fort with a fosse and a pillar stone'. Macalister, after that less than successful investigation in 1913, thought the site to be a ceremonial one, the mound being a scarped esker. Superficially, 'Dathi's mound' appears to consist of a low mound, with a pillar stone at its centre, encircled at a distance of a few metres by a low earthen bank with entrances on the east and west. A field bank runs across the limits of the monument on the north and it has an average overall diameter of about 38m. Limited excavation in 1981 confirmed Macalister's statement that the mound was a scarped esker being composed of natural gravel; its builders had made use of a small gravel ridge which, like others in the vicinity, runs north to south. The bank proved to be constructed of stones and earth with no external or internal facing, it averaged about 2m in width and only 30 cm in height. Inside the bank, however, traces of a substantial ditch were found, it was about 1m in depth and 2 to 3m wide; a surprising feature of this ditch was that it appeared to have been deliberately filled with a homogeneous deposit of brown clay shortly after it had been dug. No explanation was forthcoming for this strange ritual but the presence of a ditch inside the bank indicates some affinity with the ring-barrow type of monument. The standing stone is a large tapering slab 1.80m high, its broad faces are orientated east and west. In 1844 O'Donovan reported that it had been knocked down by cattle since his visit there in 1837 and 'was now lying prostrate to the disgrace of the neighbouring gentry' (1844, 24). It had evidently been replaced in its present position by 1852 when Brash visited the area and Ferguson's sketch of 1864 shows it as it is today. How accurately it was replaced is not known, the 30 cm difference between today's height and O'Donovan's measurements possibly indicates that it was reset that much deeper in the ground. This is not the only disturbance suffered by the monument: traces of an old excavation into the natural mound are clearly visible on the south. Macalister dug around the stone and found no trace of burial but, since the 1981 excavations were also limited in extent, the question whether or not this was a burial monument remains unanswered. However, a radiocarbon date of 170 ± 25 bc. (GrN — 11220) obtained from a sample of scattered and very small charcoal fragments from the lower levels of the bank and the old ground surface beneath it suggests the possibility that it was built in the last few centuries BC.

The ground slopes to a shallow valley just south of 'Dathi's mound' and on this southern slope about 100m to the south of 'Relignaree' there is another smaller enclosure with associated souterrain and a complex of ancient fields (Plate 6:15). Knox called this enclosure 'cashel no. 4' and his plan, as is sometimes the case, is misleading. This is an almost circular monument formed by a single denuded bank with no visible ditch. The average internal diameter is 41m, the bank is generally about 30 cm high and 2.50m wide and there are several gaps in it, none clearly identifiable as an entrance. Some quarrying has interfered with the bank on the south-west.

Plate 5. 'Dathi's mound' (14) from south-west (April 4th, 1981).

Plate 6. Enclosure (15) to the south of 'Relignaree' with linear earthwork (16), field system and megalithic tomb (17). (Photograph: J.K. St. Joseph, Cambridge University Collection, July 8th, 1964).

The interior is divided in two by a low bank which runs from north to south and which does not appear to join the perimeter. There are traces of a souterrain (A) some 22m outside the enclosure on the south-west. Irregular field banks lie immediately to the south and east enclosing small plots; on the west, a field bank runs irregularly from the edge of the enclosure to the north-west to join the southernmost of a pair of parallel earthen banks (Plate 6:16). Knox (1914, 29) termed this linear earthwork a 'road'; the parallel banks delimit an area about 90m in length and 11.80m in width and they average about 40 cm in height and 2.50m in width. Today there is a pool of water just beyond the north-western end of this feature and beyond this again a long and sometimes fairly massive field bank runs northwards towards the area of 'Oweynagat' and southwards to join a field system in the valley. It was probably this field bank which led Norman and St. Joseph (1969, 65) to claim that the whole area of 'Relignaree' and enclosures 12 and 15 was enclosed by an extensive earthen embankment.

Though not part of the complex of monuments on the higher ground, the very ruined remains of a megalithic tomb in the valley deserve mention (Plate 6:17). Five orthostats and several recumbent stones survive of a large tomb which was at least 10m in length. Its long axis lies east-west and while it cannot be classified with certainty, it has been suggested that it may be a court tomb, possibly of the dual court type (De Valera and Ó Nualláin 1972, 35). If this is so, it indicates prehistoric activity in the area in the third or fourth millennia BC.

'Cashelmanannan' and 'the Mucklaghs'

An interesting group of earthworks is situated on and just below the 120m contour about 600m west of 'Relignaree'. Two linear earthworks known as 'the Mucklaghs' are among the most imposing of the Rathcroghan monuments; according to Knox (1914, 28) they are so called because legend has it they are the results of the rootings of a magical boar. The northern 'Mucklagh' (no. 18) is the shorter and more massive of the two (Plate 7). It consists of a relatively closely set pair of large earthen banks which curve very slightly and run roughly east to west down a gentle slope for a distance of about 100m; the banks, which are set 2.50m to 3m apart, average 3m in height and are 5 to 7m in width. At their western end, a pair of smaller banks, akin to the average field bank in the vicinity, flank a small pool of water close to the modern field boundary; these smaller banks once continued into the adjacent field and one connects with the southern 'Mucklagh' (no. 19) at a gap in one bank near, but not at, its end. The latter 'Mucklagh' is a more or less straight pair of earthen banks some 200m long and set about 6m apart which measure up to 2m in height and up to 4m in width. At the north-eastern end, one bank with traces of a ditch on its north-western side continues on for over 150m. At the other end, the parallel banks terminate not far from a pool of water (visible in Plate 8) which Knox called the 'Caldra pool'; a section of field bank seems to run across the intervening area and there are traces of a third bank running parallel to part of the main earthwork. Porcine explanations aside, it is difficult to suggest anything other than a ceremonial purpose for the large embankments.

'Cashelmanannan' ('Manannan's Fort') is nearby and consists of the remains of a much ruined enclosure with two small fields attached (Plate 8). When O'Donovan recorded the monument in 1837 it was as denuded as it is now. It is of irregularly oval plan with an overall diameter of 58m north-south; its enclosing bank or banks survive to a maximum height of about 50 cm but are often much less, they are sometimes as much as 2m wide. According to Westropp (1919, 6) these various banks were once conjoined. The larger of the two adjacent fields, that on

the north, measures about 42 by 36m.

'Oweynagat'

When Samuel Ferguson visited 'Oweynagat' (Fig. 1:21) in 1864, he observed that the entrance to the famous cave was situated in an earthwork of some description. His sketch-plan (Plate 9) seems to show some sort of circular enclosure which he described as 'the remains of a tumulus of about twenty yards in diameter'. In comparison to 'Relignaree' he saw it as 'a minor cemetery, also circular' (Ferguson 1872, 117). It now seems that 'Relignaree' is a non-funerary enclosure, with a souterrain, and the same is presumably true of the circular monument at 'Oweynagat' but regrettably hardly a trace of it remains today. The northern part of the site has been obliterated by a road built a few decades ago and south of this road there now lie only a few scattered stones. Ferguson's description of the cave is brief: 'it consists of a natural fissure in the limestone rock, which appears to have been artificially widened, so as to give an average breadth of five feet throughout a distance of about forty yards . . . the floor of which is fifteen to twenty-five feet under the surface'. A souterrain forms a man-made entrance to this narrow cave; built of dry-masonry walling and roofed with slabs, one chamber of this souterrain is a prolongation of the fissure (B on Ferguson's plan), the other is at a right angle to this. It is through the latter chamber (A) that the cave may be entered at present, albeit with some difficulty. The inner lintel of this section bears the ogham carving which so delighted Ferguson (Plate 10): on the outermost edge there occurs (as Rhys read it) the genitive name VRAICCI and on the inner edge the words MAQI MEDVVI. The inscription has been translated '(the stone or grave) of Fraich, son of Medb'. A lintel in the other chamber (B on plan and just visible on the left of Ferguson's sketch in Plate 10) bears a second but apparently incomplete and untranslatable inscription QUREGASMA. It is possible that these commemorative stones originally stood someplace in the locality before being incorporated as roof-stones in the souterrain. Since the majority of ogham inscribed stones probably date from the third or fourth to the seventh centuries AD, this presumed secondary use is likely to have occurred in the latter part of the first millenium. Aside even from the intriguing Medb inscription, the mere presence of an ogham stone at 'Oweynagat' is noteworthy: such stones are very rare in Connacht, the majority being found in the south of Ireland.

There is a small ring-barrow (Plate 11, no. 22) about 90m north-west of the entrance to 'Oweynagat'. It is well preserved and consists of a low, flat-topped mound surrounded at least in part by a ditch outside of which is a penannular bank. The depth of the ditch (from top of bank and mound) is about 50 cm and the overall diameter is about 24m. There is a broad gap in the bank on the west and traces of some disturbance in the centre of the mound. This is Knox's 'ring no. 2'; his plan is inaccurate. Several rectangular depressions occur in the ground near the monument, these are common in parts of the Rathcroghan area (e.g. Plate 16) and elsewhere in the county. There are also two natural fissures in the limestone just north-east of this site, they are surrounded by a modern stone wall.

'Rathnadarve'

The modern road from Rathcroghan cross-roads to Castlerea runs just beside 'Rathnadarve' ('The fort of the bulls'), a name recorded by O'Donovan. As an aerial view shows (Plate 12:23) this is a fine univallate circular enclosure; an aerial photograph of the site from the north has been published by Bracken (1973, 19). A substantial earthen bank, on average 2.20m high and 5m wide

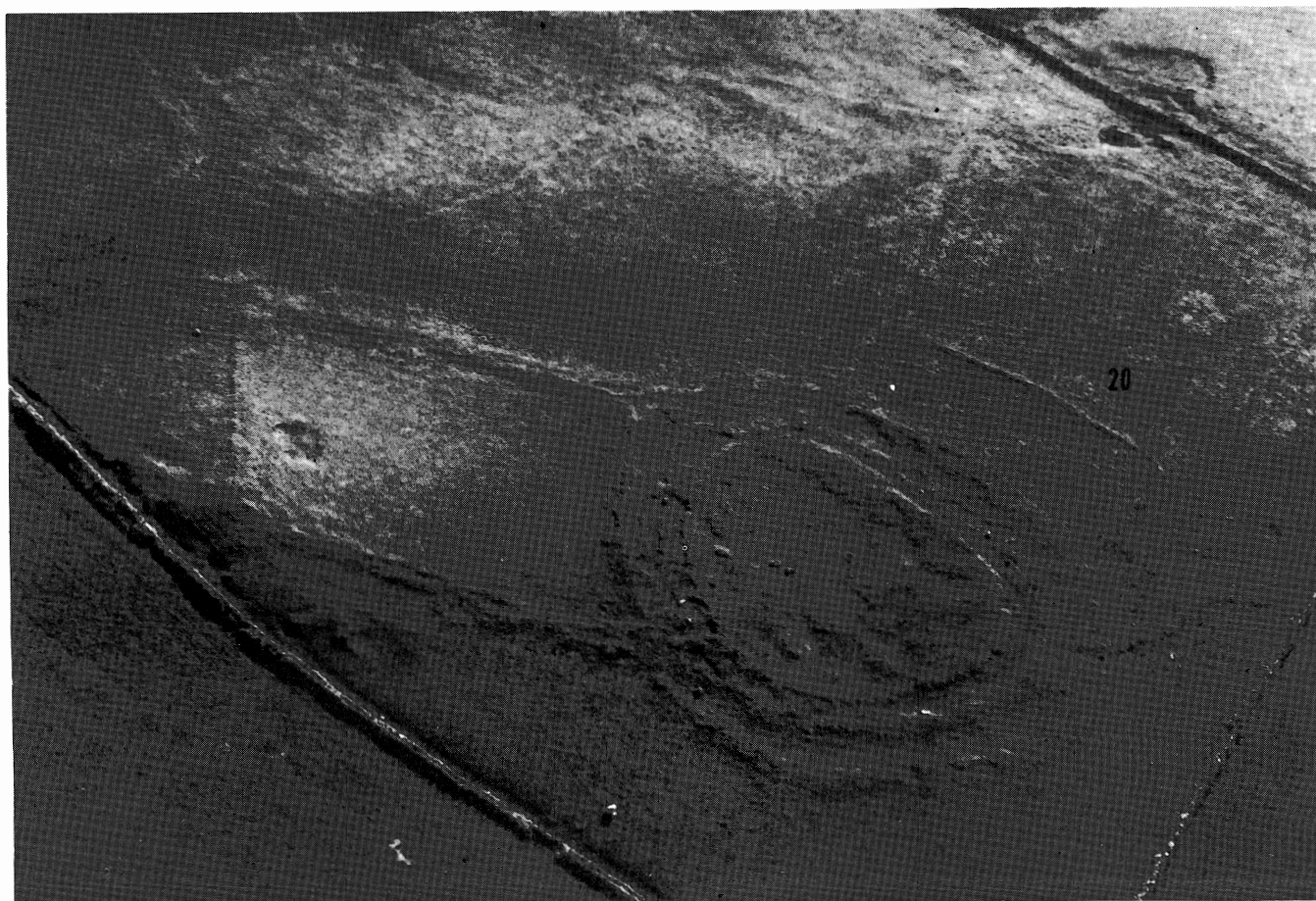*Plate 7. The northern (18) and southern (19) 'Mucklaghs' (March 17th, 1982).*

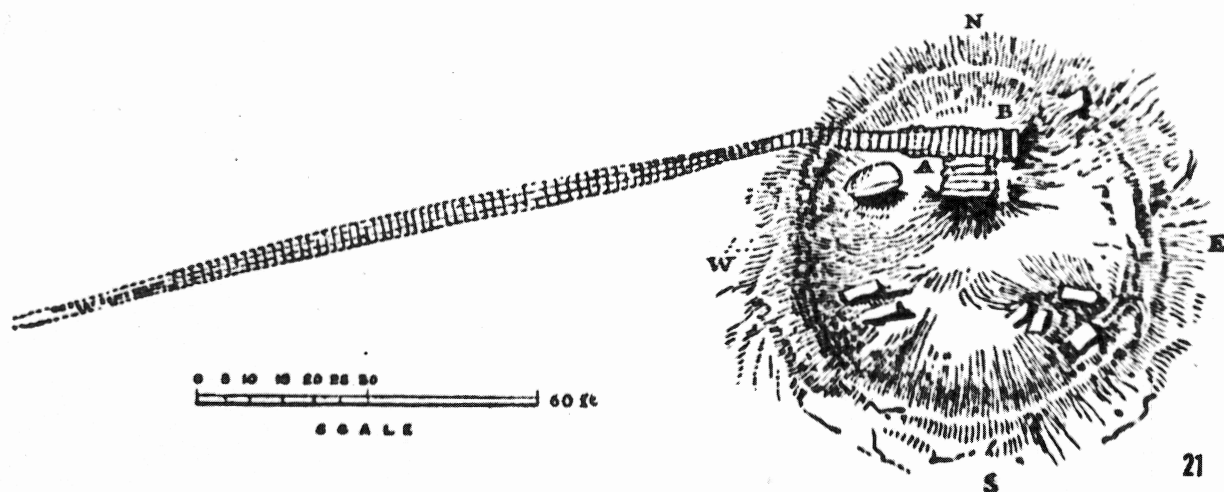*Plate 8. 'Cashelmanannan' (20) from south-west. (Photograph: G. Bracken, April 23rd, 1972).*

Plate 9. Sketch-plan of 'Oweynagat' (21) and enclosure (by Samuel Ferguson).

encloses an area some 85m in diameter. There is an external ditch about 6m in average width and 50 cm in depth with a slight counterscarp bank. There are several small gaps in the bank probably caused by cattle, a larger gap about 6m in width on the north does not seem to have a corresponding causeway across the ditch and may not be an entrance, a similarly sized gap on the south may have been an entrance, but its causeway — if it had one — has been obscured by the road. The interior of the enclosure rises to a more or less flat top about 20m across and it appears that the builders of the bank decided to encompass a low oval hillock 4 to 5m high. The precursor of the modern road is visible from the air, it ran just to the east of and more or less parallel with the present route in the immediate area of this site.

Aerial photography has revealed traces of a remarkable monument just over 200m north-west of 'Rathnadarve'. It was first photographed in 1964 by J. K. St. Joseph of the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography (Plate 13:24). Little or no trace survives on the ground of what may have been the largest enclosure of all in the Rathcroghan complex, of approximately oval plan, it has a maximum diameter of some 200m. On the east there seems to be traces of a double bank but on the ground at this point only a slight, 10m wide, rise in the ground is apparent. The small circular feature nearby within the enclosed area does not seem to be ancient. However, an old trackway which appears as a slight hollow about 3m wide bisects the site following the line of the field wall running from east to west. According to Knox this trackway continued eastwards to connect with the section of trackway (no. 8) to the south of 'Rathcroghan mound'.

'Rathbeg' and 'Rathmore'

The builders of several monuments at Rathcroghan seem to have used natural ridges or hillocks in various ways and this is true of two sites in the general area of Rathcroghan cross-roads. O'Donovan recorded the name 'Rathbeg' ('Little fort') for an unusual type of burial mound on the eastern side of the Castlerea road. This mound (Plate 14:25) is possibly a bivallate ring-barrow consisting of a low mound encircled by two banks each with internal ditch; it may, however, be an embanked tumulus like 'Rathscreg' (Plate 18). It occupies a prominent natural rise, the pair of banks being in fact one above the other on its slope. The overall diameter is about 45m and because of the slope of the ground it is difficult to judge the true height of banks and mound. 'Rathmore', some 360m to the north-east, is a very different type of monument and one, perhaps, a little more accurately named. A natural hillock may have been scarped to provide an elevated site: a well-defined ditch with an average width of about 5m surrounds a steep-sided mound (Plate 15:26). The ditch is crossed by two causeways about 6m wide, one on the north-east resembles an un-cut section of ditch, the other on the south-east slopes to the summit; a slight outer bank is visible on the north. The top of the mound, which is about 6m above ground level, rises gently towards its centre and is enclosed by a penannular bank about 1m high. The enclosed area has a diameter of 28m.

The site which Knox (1911, 235; 1914, 13) named 'Little Rathbeg' (Fig. 1:27) was poorly defined when he described it and today it is obscured by farm-yard rubbish and silage-pit. Knox gave it this name because 'it is an
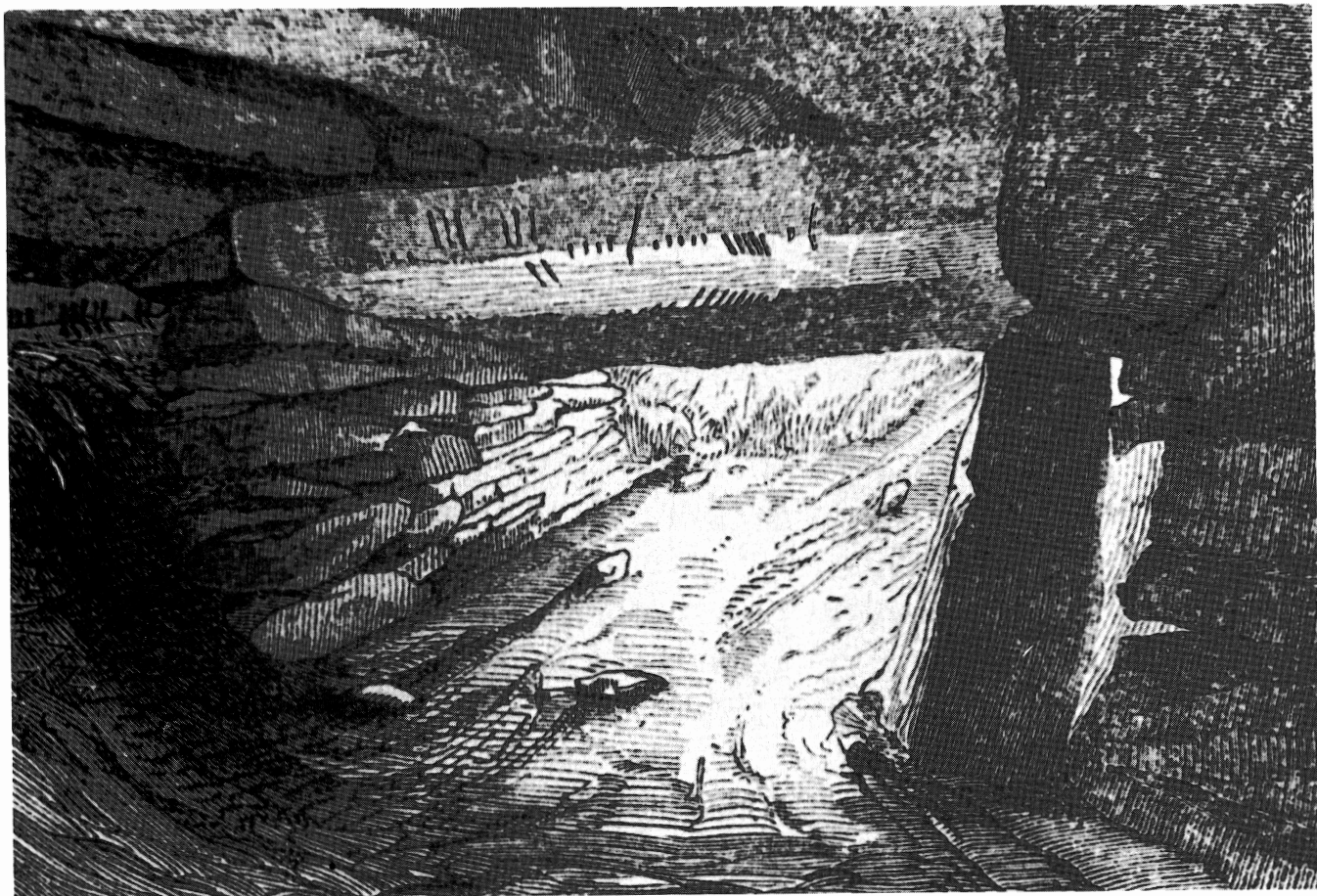
Plate 10. Sketch of ogham stone in roof of souterrain at 'Oweynagat'; the second ogham is just visible on the extreme left (by Samuel Ferguson).
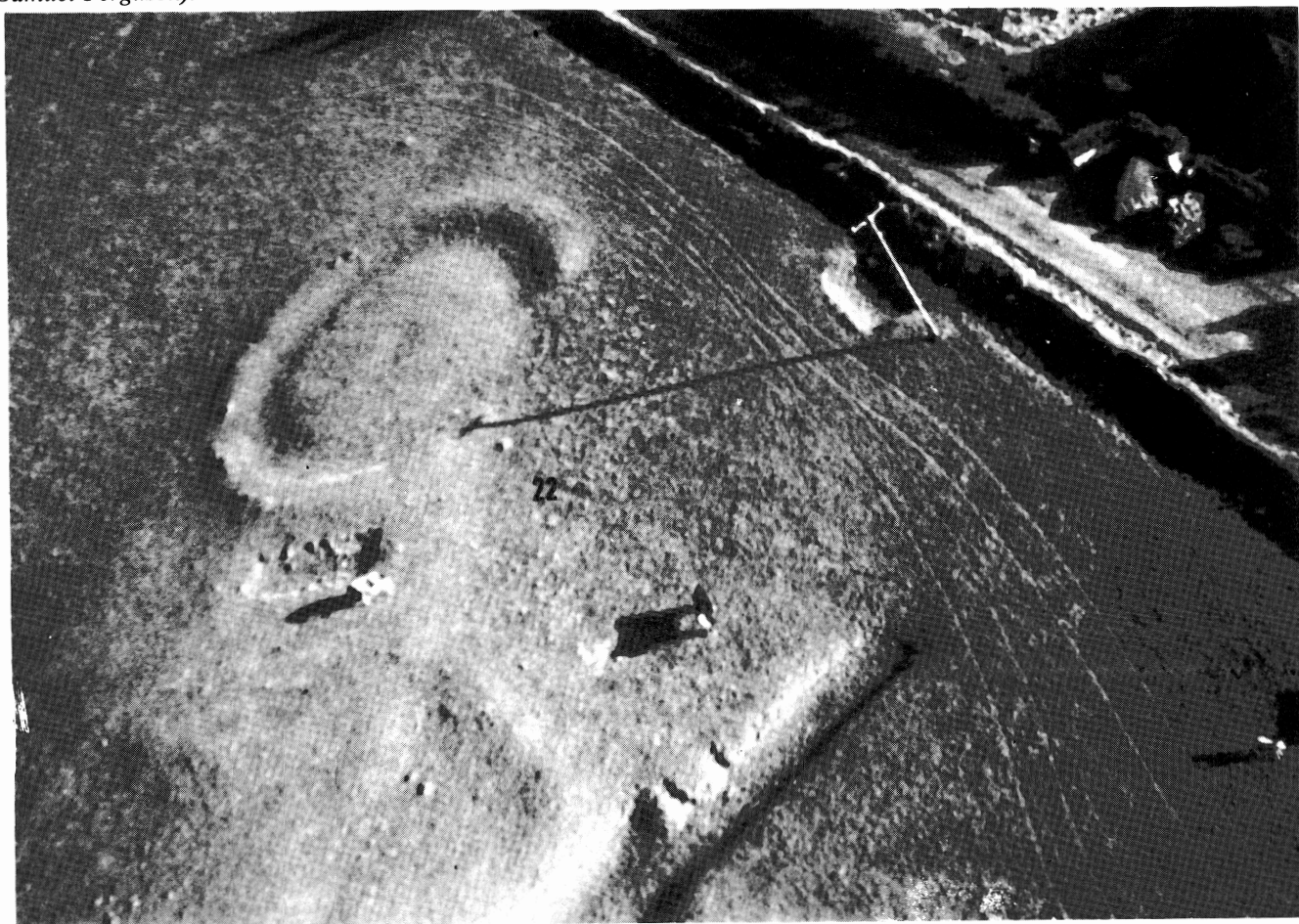

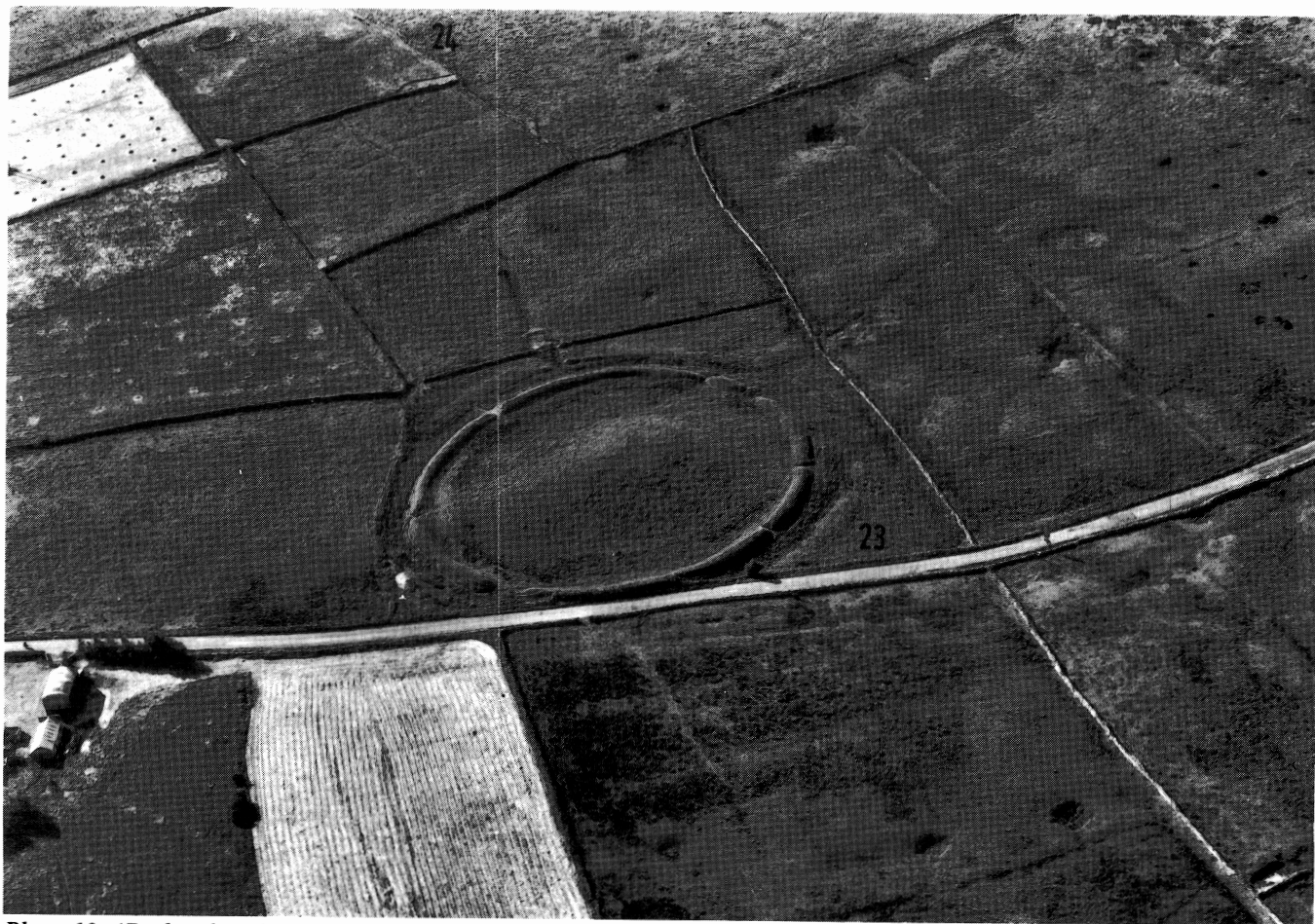*Plate 11. Ring-barrow (22) near 'Oweynagat' from north-west (April 4th, 1981).*

Plate 12. 'Rathnadarve' (23) with enclosure (24) to north-west. (Photograph: J.K. St. Joseph, Cambridge University Collection, July 8th, 1964).

exact but flat representation of Rathbeg', in other words a mound encircled by two banks but not situated on a hillock. If Knox is correct it may have had an overall diameter in excess of 20m. Just south-west of this site, a pair of parallel earthen banks (Fig. 1:28) terminates near a pond and immediately to the south there are traces of an ancient trackway running east-west. The site marked 'Oweyaniska' on the Ordnance Survey maps (Fig. 1:29) is greatly defaced and difficult to classify; the remains of a possible earthwork on a slight ridge contain a possible souterrain. To the north of 'Rathmore' an ancient trackway runs northwards for over 1000m. Just to the east of this trackway, which is depicted on the 1817 map by William Edgeworth already mentioned, O'Donovan recorded a 'fort' and Knox noted 'a nearly rectangular enclosure of about two acres' allegedly with bank and ditch situated at or near the spot marked 'Knockanstanley' on the Ordnance Survey maps. There is no trace of a fort here but there is a complex of old field banks and a parallel pair of low earthen banks which traverse a natural ridge. Further north, also in the townland of Ballyconboy, aerial photography has revealed traces of a low and approximately rectangular monument (Fig. 1:30) which survives as a low rise in the ground measuring about 40 by 33m. In the same townland immediately to the west of the trackway is a small circular burial mound measuring about 7m in diameter and 1m in height (Fig. 1:31). A low sub-rectangular platform about 6m by 8m adjoins the mound on the north. Like the next monument, this mound is situated at what seems to be the northern limits of the Rathcroghan complex, commanding very gently sloping land and extensive views to the north and east. Another type of burial mound lies some 600m to the east-north-east in Grallagh townland; recorded by Knox (1914, 40) as the 'Corrauneen' (Fig. 1:32) this is a fine example of a ring-barrow with a

conspicuous mound some 2.40m high encircled by a ditch with external bank; the overall diameter is about 18m. Just 30m south of this there seems to be a second but different type of ring-barrow (Fig. 1:33): a very slight mound with traces of ditch and external bank mainly on the north and east may have had an overall diameter of about 30m. Finally, almost 800m to the south in Toberrory townland, there is a simple burial mound (Fig. 1:34) prominently sited on a low ridge with views of 'Caran Fort' and tumulus to the east and 'Rathcroghan mound' to the south. This simple mound is circular, 7.50m in diameter and 1m in height.

'Caran Fort'

At the site named 'Caran Fort' there is a small but interesting group of monuments surrounded by extensive traces of ancient fields (Plate 16:35). A sub-rectangular enclosure straddling a low ridge lies immediately to the south of a prominent burial mound. The enclosure, which is almost D-shaped, measures about 42m internally from north to south. It is formed by an earthen bank with external ditch 2 - 3m wide; the ditch is well defined on the east but less clearly so on the west where a field bank may obscure it. The interior of the enclosure rises towards its centre. There is a small stone (40 by 30 cm) with an oval depression (14 by 12 by 10 cm deep) in it just outside the enclosure on the south. The burial mound is a steep-sided, flat-topped monument about 4m high and 10m in diameter, it is situated within an irregularly-shaped area delimited by several field banks (including a long C-shaped field bank which runs from north to east). Several large stones lying beside the C-shaped field bank and just beyond a rectangular depression to the north of the mound may be the remains of a possible souterrain noted by O'Donovan.
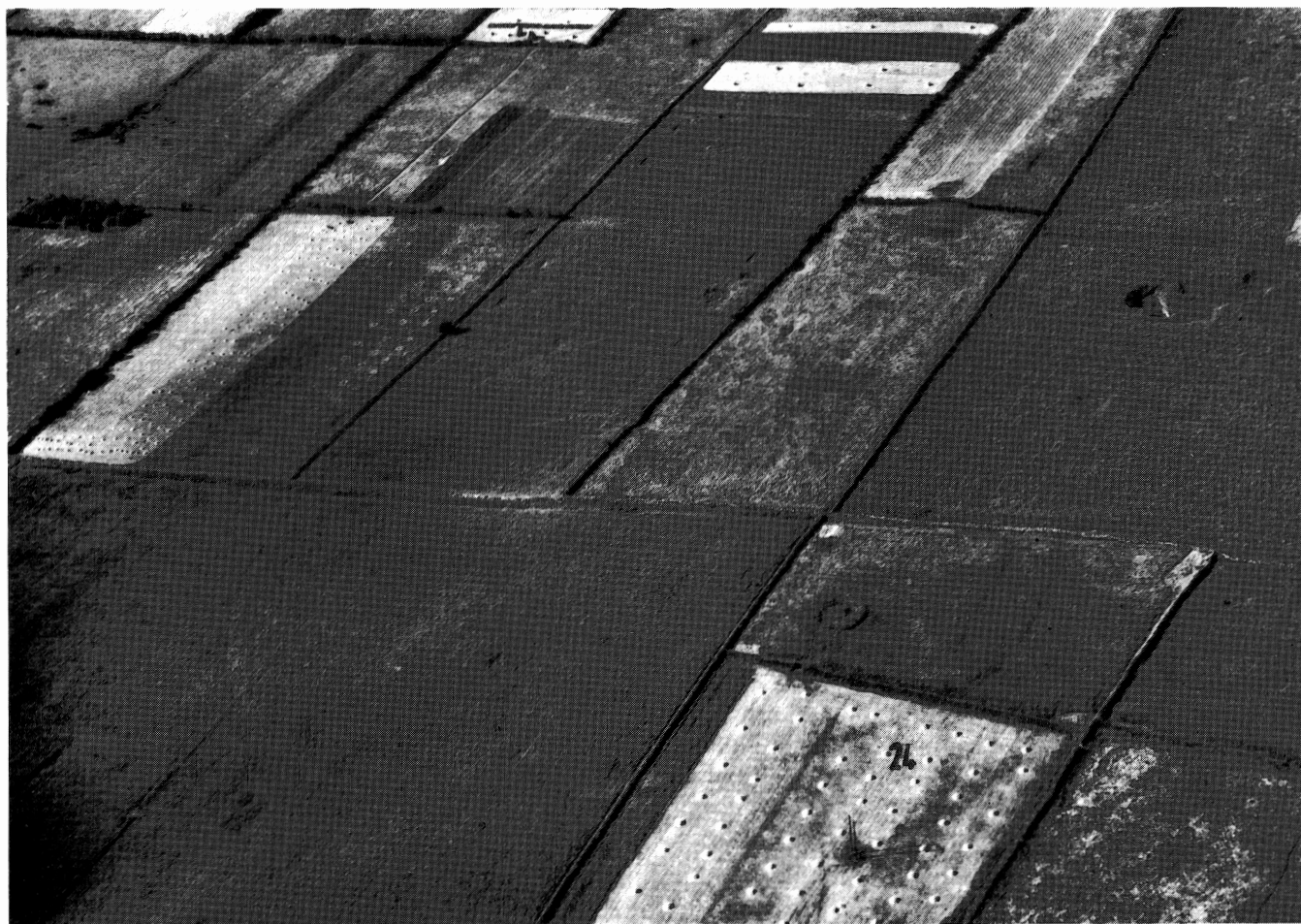
Plate 13. Enclosure (24) from south. (Photograph: J.K. St. Joseph, Cambridge University Collection, July 8th, 1964).

Plate 14. 'Rathbeg' (25) from north. (Photograph: G. Bracken, September 17th, 1972).
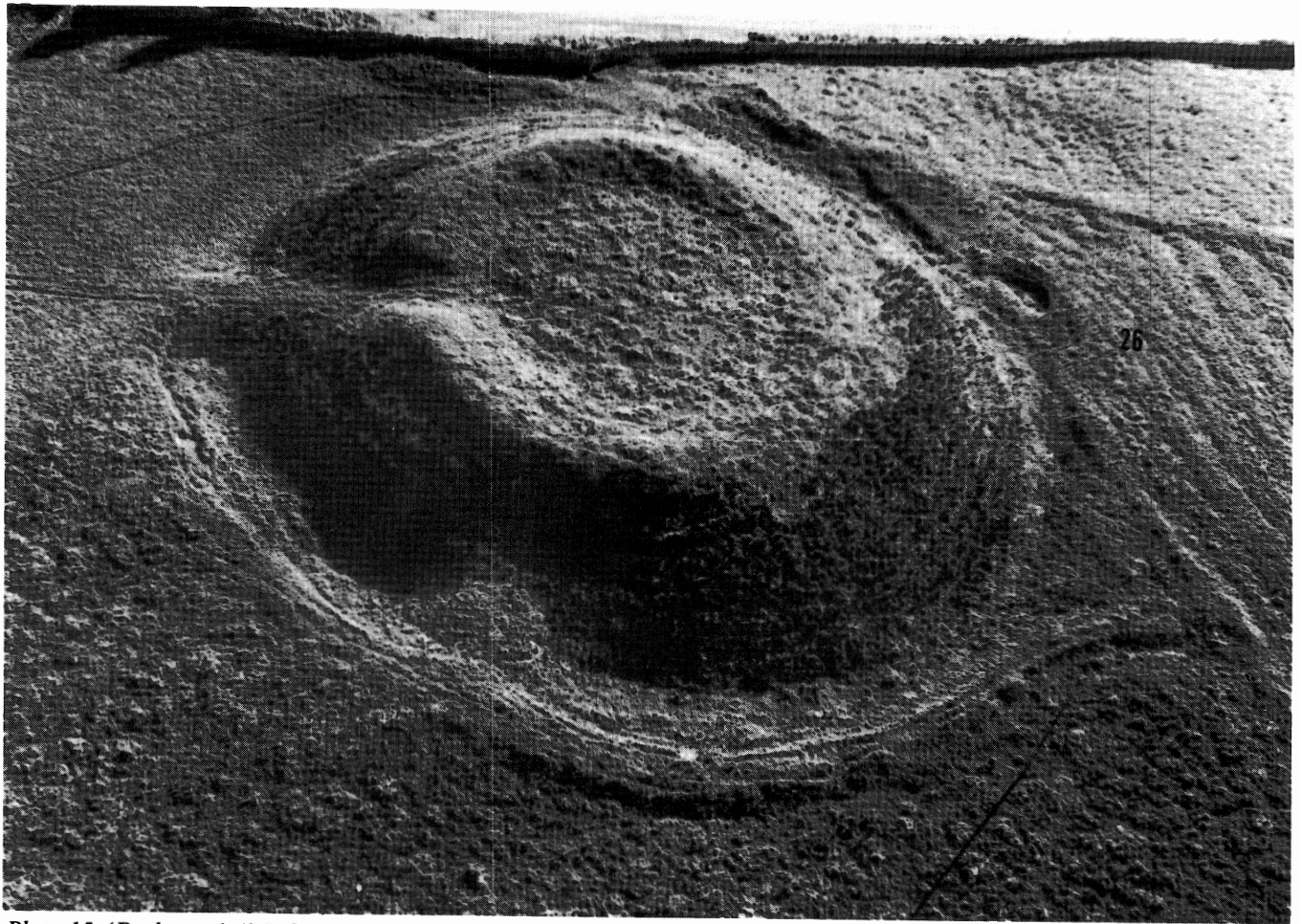
Plate 15. 'Rathmore' (26) from north. (Photograph: G. Bracken, September 17th, 1972).

'Courtmoyle'

A low ridge has been lightly scarped to produce a low platform earthwork for which O'Donovan recorded the name 'Courtmoyle'. The monument (Plate 17:36) is of approximately oval shape, some 40m in greatest diameter. There are slight traces of a bank at the perimeter of the elevated area, they are visible notably on the north-west; on the south and west even the limits of the site are difficult to trace on the ground. The interior contains two rectangular water-filled depressions and except for the water these are much the same as the other rectangular depressions which dot the area. To the south there is a complex of field banks and linear earthworks which Knox called 'avenues'. An 8m wide system of parallel earthen banks to the south-west of 'Courtmoyle' runs westwards and, at the latter site, turns south for some 97m to join a long stretch of linear banks (Plate 17:37) running in an east-west direction. This is formed by a more or less parallel pair of earthen banks 0.50m to 1m high, a few metres wide and placed up to 16m apart; it is traceable almost continuously to the west to within 150m of Rathcroghan cross-roads and to the east as far as the burial mound known as 'Flanagan's Fort' (below), a total distance of some 940m. About 330m south-west of 'Courtmoyle', there is another smaller platform earthwork (Plate 17:38), of approximately circular plan with an overall diameter of about 34m; it has suffered some disturbance particularly on the east.

'Rathscreg' and 'Flanagan's Fort'

The eastern part of the linear earthwork (no. 37) leads to 'Rathscreg' (Plate 18:39), not a fort as the name might suggest but a burial mound encircled by one or possibly two banks. It has been described after a fashion by Knox

(1914, 20) and Bracken (1973, 22) has published an aerial view of it and the adjacent linear earthwork as seen from the west. The circular burial mound which measures about 8m in diameter and 1.20m in height is situated on top of a low rounded hillock damaged by quarrying on its western side. The mound lies in the western half of an approximate oval, about 30m in maximum dimensions, formed by a very low narrow bank with the occasional stone protruding. The antiquity of this oval enclosure is somewhat uncertain for Knox records it as 'a modern stone sheepfold'. It is in turn enclosed by a larger oval bank, now just a slight rise in the ground on the lower slopes of the hillock. This enclosed area measures about 74 by 50m and the mound lies at its approximate centre. The stratigraphical relationship of this larger enclosure to the linear earthwork is not clear: the southern bank of the latter, for example, seems to be cut by the oval bank but it could also be claimed that the linear bank stops at and respects the other. Aerial photography has demonstrated the presence of two circular monuments, possibly burial mounds with ditches, to the east of 'Rathscreg' (marked but not visible on Plate 18:40 and 41). They are just detectable on the ground: no. 40 is the more prominent of the two and seems to consist of a very low circular mound surrounded by a ditch with an overall diameter of perhaps 12m. No. 41 is less well defined, it seems to be similar but slightly larger. In neither case does there seem to be any trace of an external bank but certainty is impossible. The linear banks to the south of these sites continue eastwards and apparently terminate at or near 'Flanagan's Fort' (Plate 19:42) which according to Knox (1914, 23) acquired its name from a man who lived nearby. A little over half of this circular monument is traceable on the ground and, as Knox noted, it consists of a bank with internal ditch. This bank seems to enclose an area of gently rising ground and with the cutting of a broad internal ditch (most clearly

Plate 16. 'Caran Fort' and burial mound (35) from north-east (March 17th, 1982).

Plate 17. 'Courtmoyle' (36) and linear earthworks (37) from north (March 17th, 1982).

Plate 18. 'Rathscreg' (39), linear earthwork (37) and sites of two possible burial mounds (40-41) from north-east (March 17th, 1982).

visible on the south) a natural circular mound was left in the centre. This central area has a diameter of about 45m and a very low oval mound, about 5.50 by 3.50m lies a little off centre. The overall diameter is about 60m and the use of a bank and internal ditch to enclose a natural mound recalls 'Dathi's mound'.

'Toberrory Fort', 'MacDermot's Fort' and 'Cahernabavalody'

It was, it seems, Knox (1914, 24) who named the monument called 'Toberrory Fort' after a nearby well. The site (Fig. 1:43) is a roughly circular platform earthwork (similar to that shown in Plate 20:45), it has a height of about 1m and an overall diameter of about 27m. There are traces of a low bank at its edge, particularly on the north; some disturbance to the platform is visible on the south-west and a few large stones are exposed on its southern edge. 'MacDermot's Fort', which got its name from a nearby land-owner, is a similar monument 150m to the east (Fig. 1:44). A sub-rectangular platform about 2m in maximum height measures 37m north-south and 26m east-west. It slopes downwards from west to east where the edge is irregular possibly due to the activity of cattle. Except on the north, where there is a slight rise at its edge, there is no surviving bank. A system of small fields lies immediately to the east and there is a complex of field banks 500m to the north-east. The platform earthwork (Plate 20:45) unhappily rendered as 'Cahernabavalody' on the Ordnance Survey maps was described by O'Donovan in 1837: 'Cathair na Babhaloide, understood to mean the Rath of the feasting party, lies about three-quarters of a mile from Rathcroghan. It is said to have been the kitchen of the palace of Rathcroghan'. Ignoring the vagaries of local tradition, this site may be more accurately described as an approximately oval platform about 1m high and measuring 34m north-south and 30m

east-west. There are faint traces of a bank around part of its perimeter notably on the south and slight suggestions of a ditch on the west. A system of linear earthen banks skirts the site on the south and south-east. This pair of parallel banks can be first confidently detected south-west of 'Cahernabavalody' (Plate 20:46) running from west to east. Whether one or both banks turned northwards near the modern road is uncertain; a northwards turn does occur, however, just south of the platform earthwork and one bank is for a short stretch incorporated in the boundary between Glenballythomas and Carrowntoosan townlands. In the latter townland, the banks are crossed by the modern Tulsk to Rathcroghan road (Fig. 1) and, where well defined, they are generally about 2m wide and 50 cm high and placed 9 to 10m apart. Other monuments in this general area include another platform earthwork (Fig. 1:49) of oval plan and some 24m in greatest diameter; it is 1m high and has traces of a low bank at its northern and western edges. A cave is marked on the Ordnance Survey second edition just north of the linear earthwork; no remains of a souterrain are traceable on the ground but faint traces of a roughly circular enclosure perhaps 40m across are visible (Fig. 1:47). Further to the north-west, faint traces of another monument are just about detectable on the ground (Fig. 1:48); it seems to be a circular enclosure some 25m in diameter but when Knox saw it (1914, 35) it was obviously in better condition. According to him it was a ring-barrow with a low central mound (his 'ring no. 3'). This site is close to the main road to Tulsk which loops to the south not far away, the straight stretch of ancient roadway shown to the north of this loop on Fig. 1 was, judging from Edgeworth's map, in use in the early years of the nineteenth century. South-east of this area the main road descends towards Tulsk; east of sites 47 and 49, which lie just below the 122m (400 foot) contour, the land falls away and ringforts become fairly numerous just above and below the 91m (300 foot) contour one to two kilometres away.
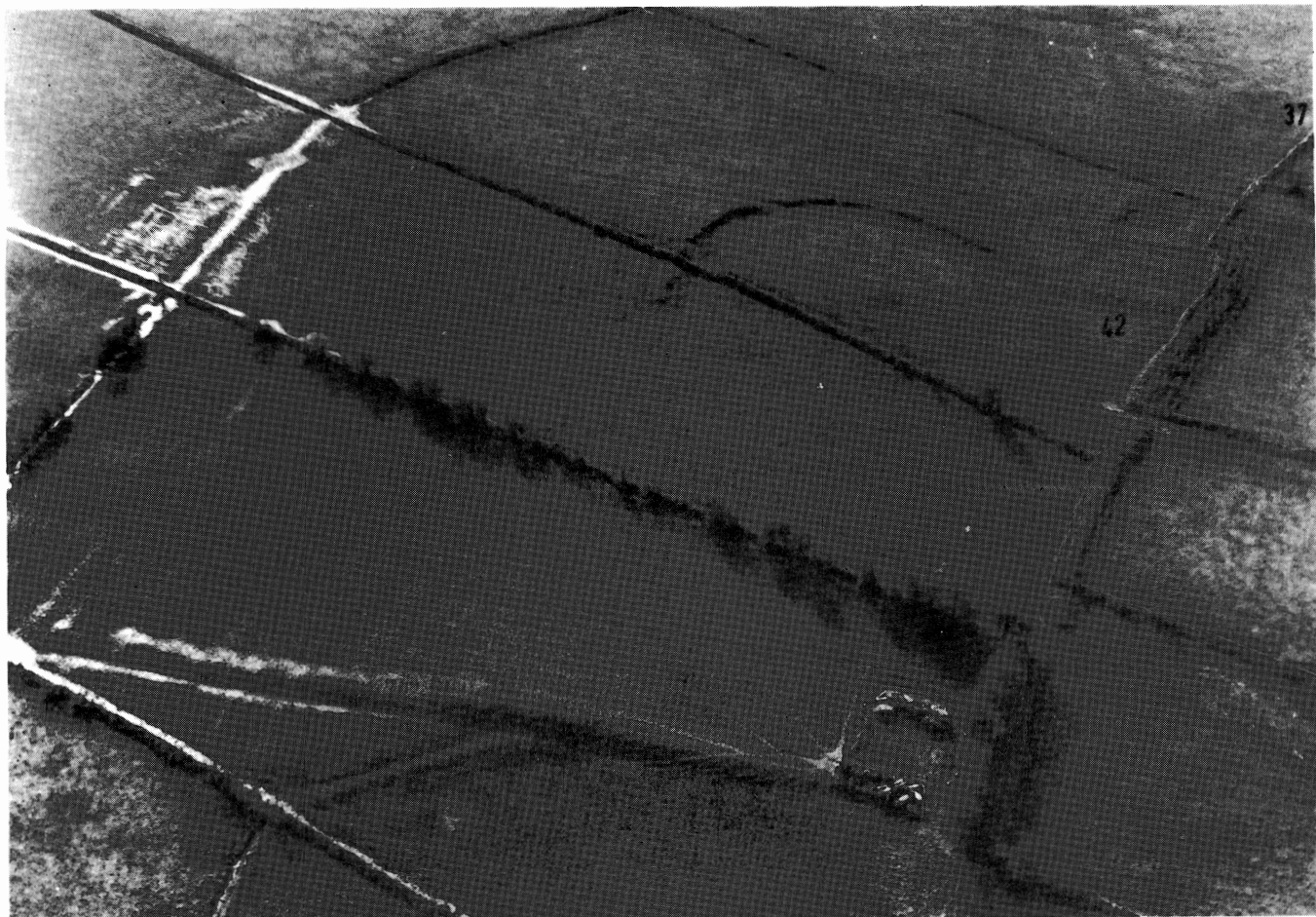
Plate 19. 'Flanagan's Fort' (42) and trace of linear earthwork (37) from east (March 17th, 1982).
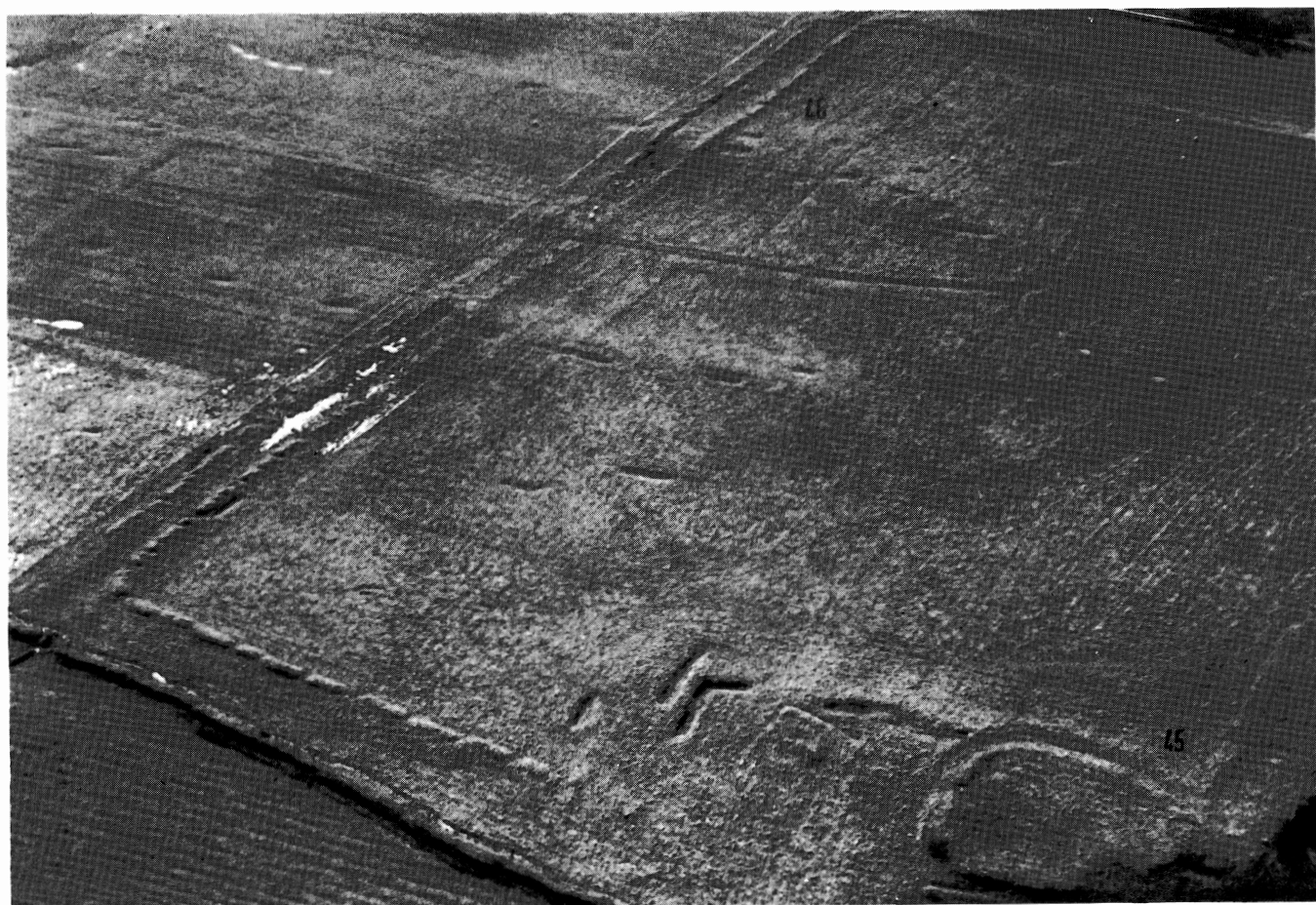

Plate 20. Linear earthwork (46) and 'Cahernabavalody' (45) from east (March 17th, 1982).

Some Archaeological Conclusions

Even a brief survey of the archaeological monuments in the Rathcroghan area clearly demonstrates their relative profusion and diversity. Including the megalithic tomb forty-nine sites have been recorded here, all within a little over 1000 hectares (about four square miles). Not included are several complexes of ancient fields, these must await more detailed survey and among them further ancient trackways and systems of parallel banks may yet be identified. The recorded monuments may be grouped, with varying degrees of certainty, into several broad categories. Needless to say, in the absence of archaeological excavation, conclusions must be tentative. The monuments fall into four major groups: funerary or ceremonial mounds, linear earthworks (and ancient trackways), enclosures, and platform earthworks. In addition, there are some half a dozen monuments of other or uncertain type.

Burial mounds or mounds which may have had some other ritual purpose are numerically the largest group; nineteen in all, they range from simple burial mounds without bank or ditch, such as the tumulus at 'Caran Fort', to the more elaborate ring-barrow such as the 'Corrauneen' with its prominent mound, ditch and external bank. Even the ring-barrows themselves display considerable variety, from conspicuous sites like the last mentioned, to low monuments like the example near 'Oweynagat', to the almost imperceptible and slightly more conjectural examples in the vicinity of 'Rathcroghan mound'. 'Dathi's mound' with its pillar stone is clearly related to sites such as these in so far as excavation has shown that there is a ditch within the encircling bank. 'Rathbeg' and 'Little Rathbeg' may be bivallate variations on the same theme, if they ever prove to have ditches inside the banks. They may, however, be related to another interesting type of monument represented by 'Rathscreg' where a small mound lies within a large circular area enclosed by a low bank. The great 'Rathcroghan mound' itself remains a puzzle and equally puzzling are the traces of what may have been a ring-barrow or an embanked tumulus on its summit: it seems reasonable to suggest the possibility of a ceremonial function for this large mound. The various types of burial mound may range in date from *ca.* 2000 BC. to the early centuries AD.

In the second group, some of the linear earthworks probably had a ceremonial purpose too. The imposing 'Mucklaghs' are substantial earthworks and Knox was surely right when he declared that the size of the northernmost of the two suggested it was not built merely to keep cows and sheep from straying while going to and from their pastures. This cannot be said, however, of the smaller pairs of parallel banks such as no. 16 south-west of 'Relignaree' and no. 28 south-west of 'Rathmore', or even of the longer stretches of embankments such as no. 46 near 'Cahernabavalody' and no. 37 in the vicinity of 'Courtmoyle', some role in live stock management is a possibility though ritual explanations cannot be excluded. Various ancient trackways have been noted on Fig. 1 but, like the field systems, these await more detailed survey. Some, such as that east of 'Rathnadarve', are the likely precursors of the modern road and others, such as the straight stretch north of the Tulsk road or that to the north of 'Rathmore', were seemingly in use within the last two centuries. The date of a trackway (no. 8) south of 'Rathcroghan mound' is difficult to determine, it is possible but by no means certain that two small ring-barrows (nos. 6 and 7) lie on top of it.

As for the third group, there are eleven or twelve enclosures of various descriptions in the Rathcroghan complex and they vary greatly in size and shape and possibly in date. The huge enclosure (no. 24) detected from the air to the north-west of 'Rathnadarve' is the largest, almost twice the size of 'Relignaree' which itself is exceptional with an internal diameter of 100m. The latter, with its relatively slight stoney bank and souterrain, is a larger than average version of a stone ringfort or cashel but, unlike some examples of the type, its enclosing wall can have had little or no defensive capability. The smaller enclosure within it may be the primary monument; with a diameter of 48m it is only slightly larger than the ruined enclosure (no. 15) to the south and of more average ringfort dimensions. 'Rathnadarve' would seem to be a fine example of the classic type of ringfort with its circular plan, earthen bank and external ditch, but the rising ground of its interior is unusual and its size (85m in internal diameter) is above average. 'Rathmore' is an impressive monument too, its ditch and high mound, with summit enclosed by a bank, form substantial defences. It might be described as a 'raised ringfort' but it remains to be seen whether its height is due to the utilisation and probable scarping of a natural hillock or to the accumulation of successive levels of habitation or, indeed, to a combination of both. While the normal ringfort was a homestead of the first millennium AD, and sites such as 'Rathmore' and 'Relignaree' have affinities with this class of monument, only scientific excavation will, in time, demonstrate their purpose and date. The same is true of other enclosures of non-circular or less regular plan such as 'Caran Fort' and 'Cashelmanannan', to mention only two.

The seven sites assigned to the fourth group, here called platform earthworks, are also probable settlements. These low, elevated monuments of irregular plan sometimes have, as at 'Cahernabavalody', traces of low banks at their edges; they may also date to the first millenium AD. or even to the Medieval period. There is, therefore, reasonable archaeological evidence, even in the absence of excavation, to suggest some settlement in the Rathcroghan area in the early Historic period. Presumably the author of the *Martyrology of Oengus* was referring to some pagan centre or pagan practices, if not indulging in some pious exaggeration, when he declared that Rathcroghan had vanished by about 800 AD. It is possible too, of course, that some or all of these enclosures had no connection at all with fabled Cruachain and traces of earlier, prehistoric settlement may still await discovery. It should also be borne in mind that while much of the archaeological evidence is not securely dated, the same is true of the Cruachain of early Irish epic literature: the royal settlement, for example, wherever and whatever it is, may well belong, as some have thought, to the centuries preceding the introduction of Christianity, it may equally well date, however, to a more remote period of the prehistoric past.

Even though the settlements of Rathcroghan's sacred kings elude identification at present, the suggestion that the various literary allusions to a great cemetery may in fact be references to a scatter of burial mounds, rather than to a single site, seems plausible. At the moment, the only archaeological indications of the former sacred character of the area are these burial mounds and a few other monuments such as the pillar stones, the intriguing ogham inscription in 'Oweynagat', and sites of a likely ritual nature such as the 'Mucklaghs' and 'Rathcroghan mound'. It is worthy of note that burial mounds seem to be a feature of importance at some royal sites. They are a prominent element at nearby Carnfree, where, as we have seen, the inauguration of Feidhlim Ó Conchobhair as king of Connacht took place in 1310 AD. The principal monuments in this particular complex lie on elevated ground between the 91m (300 foot) and 122m (400 foot) contours in the townlands of Lismurtagh, Carrowgarve and Carns, south of the village of Tulsk. Traditionally known as Cnoc na Dála ('The Hill of the Assembly'), this high ground bears over half a dozen enclosures, some ancient field systems and several burial mounds. The

burial cairn known as Carnfree occupies the highest ground and the monuments in its immediate vicinity include a burial mound seemingly known in early Irish literature as Dumha Shealga ('The Mound of the Hunt'), several ring-barrows, a small embanked enclosure with internal ditch and pillar stone, and another, prostrate, pillar stone nearby. Some of these sites have been described by Wilde (1871, 249) and Knox (1915). The importance attached to the burial mound of Carnfree itself is clearly illustrated in a tract written some time in the later Middle Ages on the subject of the inauguration of O'Conor. It commences 'This is how the kings of Connacht are made king' and proceeds to list those who may attend and their duties; part of it reads:

'The kings of Bréifne and Uí Fhiachrach and Luighne Connacht, Ó hEidhin and Ó Seachnusaigh, Mac Diarmada and the other nobles of Connacht have a right to be present at the inauguration of Ó Conchubhair. And it is Ó Maol Chonaire who is entitled to give the rod of kingship into his hand at his inauguration, and none of the nobles of Connacht has a right to be with him on the mound save Ó Maol Chonaire who inaugurates him and Ó Connachtáin who keeps the gate of the mound' (Dillon 1961, 197).

Carnfree may have replaced Rathcroghan as an inauguration place but the ancient significance of the latter is not forgotten in this tract, for Feidhlim Ó Conchobhair is poetically referred to as 'Thou holly-tree from Rathcroghan of the line of Cathal Croibhdhearg'. The explanation of the use of Carnfree rather than Rathcroghan seems to lie in the history of the O'Conors. The ancestral home of the Uí Briúin dynasty was here in the area of Dumha Shealga and an early poem describes the first certain Uí Briúin king of Connacht as 'rí Selga'. By the eighth century AD this dynasty had gained a monopoly of the kingship of Connacht and in the ninth century this monopoly was won by the O'Conor branch (Byrne 1973, 246 ff). The O'Conors presumably considered the ancestral burial ground at Carnfree an appropriate inauguration site.

With its enclosures, pillar stones, burial mounds and ring-barrows, Carnfree is comparable in some respects — though not in all — to Rathcroghan. At both sites too it is possible if not probable that the surviving monuments are not all contemporary and they may prove to reflect activity over a considerable period of time. However, when comparisons have been made between Rathcroghan and major royal sites such as Tara and Emain Macha, the absence of a hill-top enclosure with internal ditch at Rathcroghan has been thought worthy of note by several commentators. In fact it would be more accurate to say that while Tara and Emain Macha share this feature, Tara and Rathcroghan have a number of other features in common. Tara, indeed, is much more than a hill-top enclosure: a series of monuments on this hill includes, as at Rathcroghan, circular enclosures, burial mounds, a linear earthwork (the so-called 'Banqueting Hall') and ancient trackways (Swan 1978 and references). The hill is now known to have been of some importance at an early date for the 'Mound of the Hostages' there has been found to contain a late Neolithic megalithic tomb over 4000 years old as well as a subsequent Bronze Age cemetery. It is not certain, however, if Tara was continuously used over a long span of later prehistory. Nonetheless, the early date for one of its monuments is a reminder of the possibility of a ritual continuum from distant prehistoric times to the dawn of history. It is in the historic period, of course, that fragments of a rich oral tradition, itself the accumulation and distillation of centuries, were first documented. As far as sites such as Rathcroghan are concerned, this documentary evidence is rather like the archaeological evidence, it is partial and fragmentary, at best difficult to interpret and at worst indecipherable. The correlation of the two may be an insuperable task. This is not to say that the story of Rathcroghan will never be told at least in part. Further field survey and aerial survey will undoubtedly reveal more about its monuments and, in the future, increasingly refined techniques of archaeological excavation and investigation will probably demonstrate the date and purpose of many of the sites there. Its ancient importance will very likely be confirmed for archaeological significance can be quantified after a fashion, but how does one gauge the sanctity of an ancestral burial mound or recapture the importance of an entrance to an Otherworld?

NOTES

1. Mr. Con Manning has drawn my attention to a reference to Rathcroghan in the *Calendar of State Papers – Ireland.* In October 1589, when Hugh O'Conor Don was in prison, a faction of the O'Conors decided to declare one of his kinsmen chief and 'determined to call O'Conor of the Fowle Doweltegh at Ra Croghen'.

2. Ridgeway briefly alludes to the exploration of 'Relignaree' in his obituary of E.C. Quiggin in *The Caian* 28 (1920), 109.

3. The 'stone censer' said to have been found in 1804 in the cemetery of Rathcroghan and noted in *Jour. Royal Soc. Antiq. Ireland* 2 (1852-3), 354, is preserved in the National Museum (1936: 1881). It is of waisted cylindroid form with turned conical hollows at either end and is of uncertain antiquity. It is described as a stone lamp in the *Report on the National Museum of Ireland 1935-36,* 20.

Appendix

Schedule of Rathcroghan monuments

1. Mound, burial mound? 'Rathcroghan mound'. National Monument. Plate 2.
2. Rock. 'Milleen Meva'. National Monument.
3. Pillar stone, prostrate. 'Miosgan Meva'. National Monument. Plate 2.
4. Ring-barrow. Plate 2.
5. Ring-barrow? Plate 2.
6. Ring-barrow? Plate 2.
7. Ring-barrow? Plate 2.
8. Trackway. National Monument. Plate 2.
9. Enclosure. Plate 3.
10. Mound, burial mound? National Monument. Plate 3.
11. Mound, burial mound? National Monument. Plate 3.
12. Enclosure. National Monument. Plate 3.
13. Enclosure, souterrain. 'Relignaree'. National Monument. Plate 4.
14. Ring-barrow? pillar stone. 'Dathi's mound'. National Monument. Plate 5.
15. Enclosure, souterrain. National Monument. Plate 6.
16. Linear earthwork. Plate 6.
17. Megalithic tomb. National Monument. Plate 6.
18. Linear earthwork. Northern 'Mucklagh'. National Monument. Plate 7.
19. Linear earthwork. Southern 'Mucklagh'. National Monument. Plate 7.
20. Enclosure. 'Cashelmanannan'. National Monument. Plate 8.
21. Souterrain, ogham stone, cave, enclosure? 'Oweynagat'. National Monument. Plate 4, 9, 10.
22. Ring-barrow. Plate 11.
23. Enclosure. 'Rathnadarve'. National Monument. Plate 12.
24. Enclosure. Plate 13.
25. Burial mound. 'Rathbeg'. National Monument. Plate 14.
26. Enclosure. 'Rathmore'. National Monument. Plate 15.
27. Burial mound? 'Little Rathbeg'.
28. Linear earthwork.
29. Earthwork, souterrain? 'Oweyaniska'.
30. Rectangular monument.
31. Burial mound.
32. Ring-barrow. 'Corrauneen'.
33. Ring-barrow.
34. Burial mound.
35. Enclosure, burial mound, souterrain? 'Caran Fort'. National Monument. Plate 16.
36. Platform earthwork. 'Courtmoyle'. Plate 17.
37. Linear earthworks. Plate 17.
38. Platform earthwork. Plate 17.
39. Burial mound. 'Rathscreg'. National Monument. Plate 18.
40. Burial mound? Plate 18.
41. Burial mound? Plate 18.
42. Burial mound. 'Flanagan's Fort'. Plate 19.
43. Platform earthwork. 'Toberrory Fort'. National Monument.
44. Platform earthwork. 'MacDermot's Fort'.
45. Platform earthwork. 'Cahernabavalody'. National Monument. Plate 20.
46. Linear earthwork. National Monument. Plate 20.
47. Enclosure, souterrain?
48. Enclosure? National Monument.
49. Platform earthwork.

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